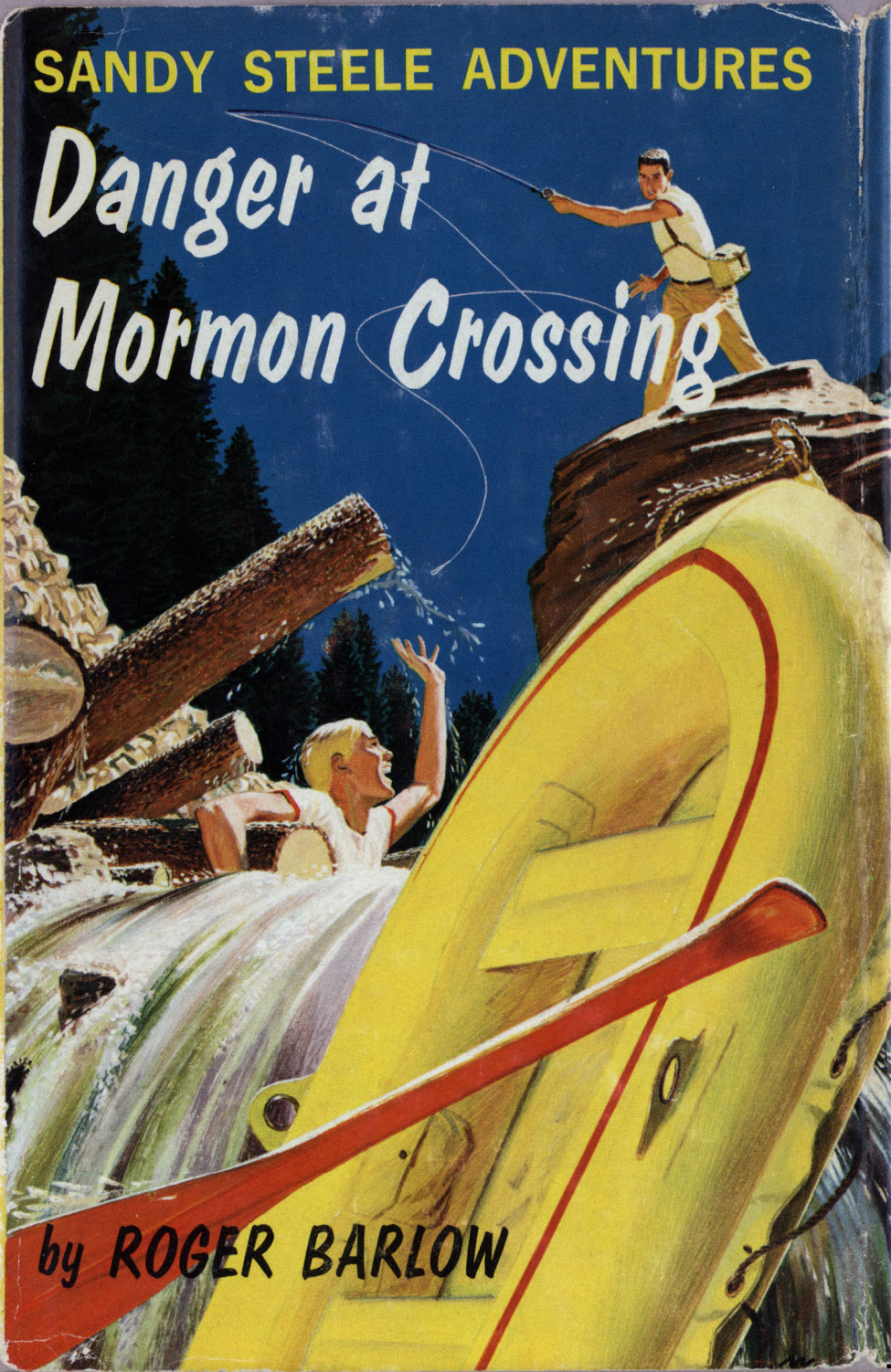
SANDY STEELE ADVENTURES

Danger at Mormon Crossing



by ROGER BARLOW

SANDY STEELE was delighted to accept the invitation of Mike Cook and his father to accompany them for a month of camping and hunting. Their trip turned out to be a lot more exciting than they had bargained for.

The boys had to learn to ride the roaring rapids. They were, however, saved the trouble of going after a mountain lion—he came to them instead. And their most dangerous hunt concerned three Crows—and a hidden cave. It was a month of high adventure.

$1.00

SANDY STEELE
ADVENTURES
by Roger Barlow

If this is the first Sandy Steele Adventure you have read, you will undoubtedly want to know more about Sandy and his friends. The back of the jacket lists other titles in the series. Choose any one of them and be sure of entertaining reading.

Whether Sandy is at home in Valley View, California, or traveling about the country, he meets interesting people and finds exciting things to do. Join him on his adventures and have fun!

Jacket painting by Paul Nonnast

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SANDY STEELE ADVENTURES 2

Danger at Mormon Crossing

ROGER BARLOW

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Danger at Mormon Crossing

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ROGER BARLOW

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SANDY STEELE Adventures

2

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SANDY STEELE ADVENTURES

BLACK TREASURE

DANGER AT MORMON CROSSING

STORMY VOYAGE

FIRE AT RED LAKE

SECRET MISSION TO ALASKA

TROUBLED WATERS

Sandy Steele Adventures

DANGER AT MORMON CROSSING

BY ROGER BARLOW

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New York, 1959

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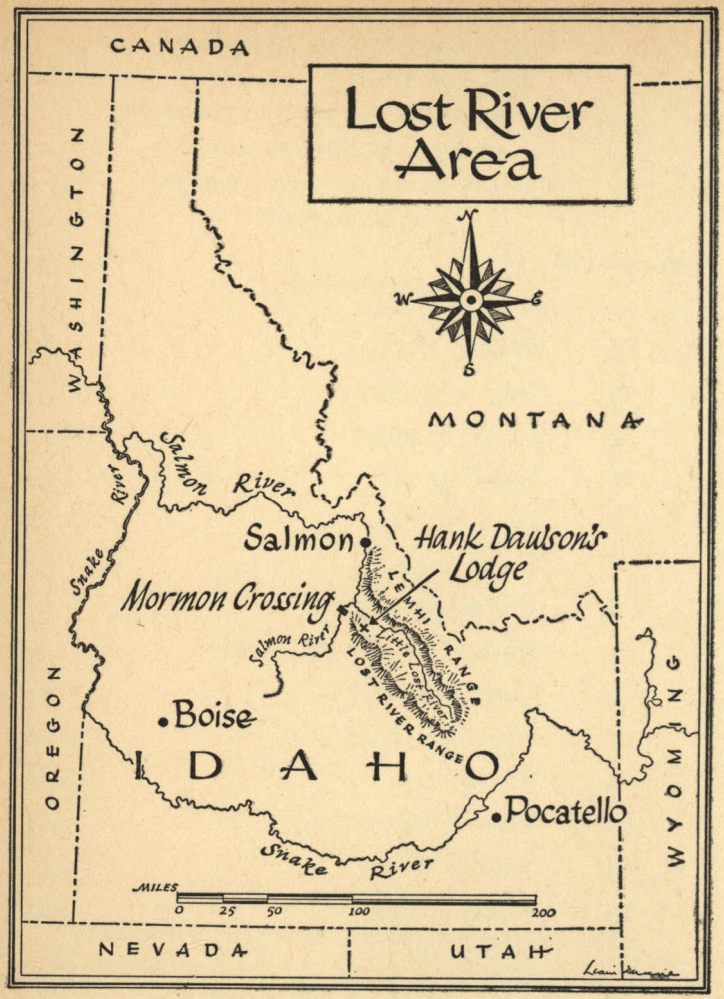
Lost River Area
CANADA
WASHINGTON
MONTANA
OREGON
WYOMING
NEVADA
UTAH
IDAHO
Salmon River
Salmon
Hank Daulson's Lodge
Mormon Crossing
Snake River
Boise
Pocatello
LEMHI RANGE
LOST RIVER RANGE
Little Lost River
MILES
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CHAPTER ONE

The Big Cats

"WHY DON'T YOU call them tonight? We've got to know pretty soon."

The speaker was Arthur Cook, a deeply tanned giant of a man with close-cropped graying hair, whose piercing blue eyes told of a lifetime spent in open spaces. He was talking to a boy of sixteen who had wrapped himself around a dining-room chair and was staring thoughtfully down at a map on the table.

"What do you say, Sandy?" Mr. Cook urged. "Want me to ring the operator?"

Sandy Steele looked up with sudden decision. "All right," he said. "We'll get it settled right now."

"That's the ticket!" chimed in Mr. Cook's son,

Michael, as he shouldered his way through the swinging kitchen door, a glass of milk in one hand and an enormous slice of layer cake in the other. "Then we can start making plans right away."

"If you think you can spare us the time from your hobby," his father said dryly.

"Hobby?" Mike's jaws closed down over the cake. "What hobby?"

"Eating. Or has it become a full-time job with you?" Mr. Cook turned to Sandy. "Ever see anybody eat so much?"

Sandy shook his head in mock amazement. "That son of yours sure can stash it away!"

Mike drained half the glass of milk in one gulp and grinned over at them. "A long time ago," he told them, "I made up my mind never to eat on an empty stomach. That's why I always have a snack before dinner." He finished the rest of the milk hastily. "That reminds me. Mom said to clear all these maps out of the dining room. Soup's almost on."

Mr. Cook got up and headed for the door to the hallway. "I'll just have time to place the call. What's your number, Sandy?"

"Valley 5-3649."

"Thanks. Mike, you take care of things in here for your mother."

"Sure . . . and hey, Dad!" Mike looked earnestly at his father.

"What?"

"You can sound awfully convincing if you want, so make it good, huh? It'd really be great if Sandy could come along."

Mr. Cook laughed and disappeared through the door. A moment later the boys heard him dialing the long-distance operator.

"Well?" Mike demanded as he gathered in the scattered maps. "What do you think?"

Sandy shrugged. "It's hard to say. I don't see why not, though. School's out for the summer and we haven't made any plans of our own."

"Guess we'll just have to hold our breath," Mike said and started for his father's den with the papers he had collected. "Tell Mom the decks are clear."

"Okay, but let me see that map again." Sandy reached out and took a large-scale National Geographic map of Idaho from the pile Mike was carrying. A rough red crayon circle had been drawn around the Snake River country in the southern part of the state. An *X* was placed further north near the town of Salmon and a thin line followed the Lost River down through a blue-gray area known as the Lost River Range. Judging

from the color of the map, the altitude there varied between 8,000 and 11,000 feet. There wasn't a sign of a town or a road for miles. It was real Rocky Mountain country, unspoiled, wild and beautiful, exactly as Sandy had always hoped one day to see it.

And now, at last, he had a chance. Mr. Cook and Mike were planning a pack trip along the Lost River and they wanted to take him along. In his mind's eye he already saw the rugged splendor of the mountains, smelled the pungent smoke of a crackling campfire after a full day's hunting or fishing.

"Hey, wake up! You look as if you're dreaming." It was Mike, back from his father's den.

Sandy looked over at him, shook his head and sighed. "I was, Mike, I really was."

Mike clapped a sympathetic hand on his friend's shoulder. "Worrying won't help. Why don't you hunt up Dad and see how he made out? I'll call you when dinner's ready."

Sandy smiled back and nodded. He had known Mike and his parents for only a little over ten days, but already they were like a second family to him. He had heard about the Cooks for about as long as he could remember. Mr. Cook was his father's oldest friend. The two men had met early

in their careers and had worked on a number of projects together. John Steele was a government geologist, while Arthur Cook was a mining engineer—one of the best in the business, according to Sandy's father.

Their work took both men away from home a great deal of the time, and for years they had been trying, without success, to bring their families together.

Finally, about three weeks ago, a letter arrived from Mr. Cook, inviting all three Steeles to spend the first two weeks of the summer vacation in Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco.

"Throw some camping gear into your car," Mr. Cook had advised. "We might all take a run up to Lake Tahoe for some fishing. Sandy and Mike have never met, but I can't think of a better way for the two boys to get acquainted than in the middle of a trout pool."

To Sandy's intense disappointment they had to turn down the offer. His father was snowed under with paper work at the office and he couldn't spare the time.

But by return mail a second letter arrived. Why not send Sandy alone? There didn't seem to be any objections, and so it was arranged.

Mike was a chunky, junior-sized version of his

father, with dancing blue eyes and a tendency to leap into things without thinking. Sandy was on the slender side, with a strong, good-humored mouth and a shock of unruly blond hair that never seemed to stay down properly. Despite their differences in appearance and personality, the two boys hit it off right from the start. And when Mr. Cook announced his plan for a month's trip through Idaho, it was assumed that Sandy would come along, provided, of course, that he got his parents' approval.

Mr. Cook appeared at the dining-room door. "Your father's on the wire," he said. "Want me to talk to him first?"

Sandy nodded briefly and followed Mr. Cook out into the hallway. Mike, who had overheard the exchange from the kitchen, slipped out and joined them.

Mr. Cook picked up the receiver, winked at Sandy and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Hello, John; how have you been? . . . Good. John, I have a favor to ask. Mike and I are planning a camping trip up to the Rockies and we'd like Sandy's company. . . . Where? North of the Snake River country, in the Lost River Range. It's for a month, but I think it would be four weeks the boys will never forget. . . . What? . . . Oh,

don't worry about that. We have plenty of equipment. . . . Yes, we'd leave in three days and be back about the tenth of next month. . . . What's that? Well here, why don't you ask him yourself?"

Mr. Cook cupped a hand over the mouthpiece and nodded to Sandy. "He wants to know how you feel about it."

"Let me talk to him!" Sandy nearly tripped over the rug in his hurry to get to the phone.

"Hello, Dad!" he shouted. "How do I feel about it! I think it's a chance of a lifetime!" There was a pause as Sandy listened carefully for several minutes. "Sure," he said at last, a grin of delight creeping over his face. "You bet! Great, Dad! I'll wire you as soon as we get back. Goodbye and give Mom a hug for me!"

Sandy put down the receiver and looked at the Cooks with a dazed smile of happiness. "It's all set!" he breathed. "What a great guy!"

Mr. Cook beamed his pleasure as Mike bounded over to Sandy and walloped him exuberantly on the back. "Attaboy, Sandy! I knew it all along!"

"Well," said Mr. Cook. "Congratulations on becoming an official member of the expedition. Soon as dinner's over, we'll go into the den and do a little homework—draw up a list of the things we'll need and talk over the kind of country we'll

be going through." He looked over at Mike with a smile on his face. "But let's wait till after we've eaten. If we get to talking about it at table, your mother won't be able to get a word in edgewise."

All through the meal, Sandy tried to put thoughts of the trip out of his mind, but with little success. His attempts at polite table talk only brought amused glances from Mrs. Cook. Mike, too, seemed preoccupied, even to the point of refusing a third helping of fried chicken—an event that so stunned his mother that she almost forgot dessert.

When they finally finished, Mr. Cook pushed back from the table and stood up. "And that, I think," he said, smiling gently, "was the quietest meal ever eaten in this house. You fellows are a couple of real sparklers in the conversation line."

"Well, Dad . . ." Mike began to protest.

Mr. Cook held up his hand. "I know. I know. You want to talk about the trip. I don't blame you. So do I. Come on in here and let's get it off our chests." He led the way into his comfortably furnished den and paused before a pipe rack. The walls of the room were hung with Mr. Cook's hunting trophies. Two whitetail deer flanked a stone fireplace, and over the mantel loomed the head of a huge Alaska brown bear. At one end of

the room, rows of bookcases shared wall space with a gleaming walnut gun cabinet.

Mr. Cook selected a pipe, fingered some tobacco into the bowl and dropped into a chair near the fireplace. "Now," he said. "Let's have some questions. The floor is open for discussion."

Both boys started together.

"Do you think I'd better . . ." Sandy blurted.

"How are we going to . . ." Mike began.

They looked at each other and grinned.

"After you, my dear Alphonse." Mike bowed solemnly. "You're the guest."

"Go ahead, Sandy," Mr. Cook invited.

Sandy leaned forward in his chair. "I was going to ask if I should send for my rifle. I have a .22 at home."

Mr. Cook laughed and put down his pipe. "I don't think you'd use it once, Sandy," he said. "This is big-game country we're going into. We'll see mule deer and elk, pronghorn antelope and mountain goats. If we're lucky we may even spot a grizzly or a bighorn sheep. And we're almost certain to run into a mountain lion or two."

"A mountain lion," Sandy breathed. "What a trophy that would make. I bet Pepper March never even saw a mountain lion!"

"Who's Pepper March?" Mr. Cook asked.

Sandy scowled. "Somebody I know back home," he said.

Mr. Cook smiled. "You don't seem to like him much."

"Oh, he's all right," Sandy explained. "It's just that he gets under my skin sometimes."

"What would you do with a mountain-lion trophy?" Mr. Cook asked. "Do you have room for him at home?"

Sandy thought a moment. "I guess you're right," he said. "But I know what I could do."

"What?"

"Start a trophy room at Valley View High. Jerry and I could build some cases, and Quiz—he's our brainy friend—could write up descriptions of all the animals—like they have in natural-history museums."

Mr. Cook nodded approvingly. "Good idea. A museum's the perfect place for a lion. But over a fireplace, I'd rather have a six-point buck any day."

"How do you rate big-game trophies, Dad?" Mike asked.

"That varies with the animal," Mr. Cook replied. "An elk, for example, is measured for spread between antlers, and the number of points

—or branches—growing out of each antler. If I remember rightly, the record elk had a spread of nearly seventy inches and about seventeen points."

"Whew!" Sandy whistled. "He must have been built like a truck!"

"He was a real granddaddy, all right," said Mr. Cook and smiled at the memory. "But to get back to your question about guns, Sandy. Here are the cannons we'll be taking along." Mr. Cook got up and moved over to the gun rack at the end of the room.

"For power shooting, we'll use this Weatherby .300 Magnum. And I think you boys ought to get used to this one." Mr. Cook reached up and took down a beautifully balanced bolt-action rifle. "That's a Remington 721 in a .30/06 caliber. It's lighter than the Weatherby but it packs quite a punch."

"Enough to bring down a mountain lion?" Mike asked eagerly.

Mr. Cook looked at the two boys and allowed a slight smile to play at the corners of his mouth. "Since you both seem to have mountain lions on the brain, I'll tell you something I was going to keep a secret . . ."

But before he could finish, the sound of a telephone bell tinkled softly from the desk in the den.

"I'll take it here, Julia!" Mr. Cook called as he reached for the receiver. "Hello," he said. He listened for a moment, then broke into a beaming grin.

"Hank Dawson! You old son of a gun! Good to hear from you." With the telephone still cradled to his ear, he maneuvered the cord across the desk and sat down in the chair behind it. "So you got my telegram. . . . Yes, we'll be there. On the eighteenth. Oh, and Hank—bring along kits for four. That's right. A friend of ours is coming along. A lad named Sandy Steele. Right. See you then. Goodbye."

Mr. Cook put down the telephone with a chuckle and swiveled around to face the boys. "Well," he said. "Speak of the devil . . ."

"Who was that?" Mike demanded.

"That, Mike, was about the best professional guide and hunter in the Rockies. His name's Hank Dawson and he has a honey of a hunting lodge up in the Lost River Range. The three of us have a date to meet Hank on the eighteenth. He's meeting us with pack mules and horses at a place called Mormon Crossing on the Lost River.

I think you'll like Hank. He shares an enthusiasm of yours."

"What's that?"

"Mountain lions. His hobby is going after the big cats. He makes a good bit of money collecting the bounty on their hides. Hank says he wants to take us up in the hills for a cougar hunt."

Mike jumped to his feet and gave a war whoop that rattled the windows. "Where exactly is this place we're going to?" he asked excitedly. "What's our first stop in Idaho?"

"Which question do you want me to answer?"

"Where are we going first?"

Mr. Cook spread the map over his desk. "Here," he said, pointing the stem of his pipe at the juncture of three rivers in central Idaho. "Near the town of Salmon. We'll stop there, hire some boats and a guide and get you two fellows used to a little white water."

"White water?" Sandy's expression was blank.

"Rapids. We're going to have to run dozens on our trip downriver. They're dangerous, too. We'll portage our way around the worst ones, but we'll go through most of them. By the way, do you know what portage is?"

"Not exactly, no," replied Sandy.

"Well, it's simple enough. When you get to a

part of any stream that isn't navigable for one reason or another, you pull in to land and tote everything, including the boat, to the next navigable part."

" 'Simple,' he calls it," groaned Mike.

"It's hard work, of course; but you'll both come back in better shape than you've ever been in your life."

Mike scrambled to his feet. "In that case," he announced, "I'm going to have to start preparing myself. I think I remember a little cold chicken going back into the icebox, and that's no way to treat chicken!" He started for the door.

"But you just finished dinner," his father pointed out.

"I know," Mike shot back over his shoulder. "But I didn't do a very good job of it. Too busy thinking about the trip."

Mr. Cook made a notation on the paper in front of him. "Item one on our list. Hire the *Queen Mary* as a provision ship so Mike will never have to go hungry."

"The *Queen Elizabeth*'s bigger," Mike called and disappeared into the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWO

White Water

FOUR DAYS LATER, Sandy and Mike stood on the pine-cloaked southern bank of the Salmon River, looking down on a patch of foaming water that boiled and hissed over jagged rocks, gleaming wet with spray.

The boys stared at each other wordlessly. Sandy was the first to break the silence. "What did your father call this place?" he asked.

"Kindergarten Rapids," Mike answered in an awed voice. "He said it was a nice easy run to start with."

The boys turned back to the river. From where they watched, they could see a tiny flotilla of bright, orange-colored air rafts bobbing along in the quiet water above the rapids. At first the

rafts seemed to float lazily downstream, but as they approached the rapids, they gradually picked up speed until they looked like miniature beetles racing along to certain destruction on the shoals ahead.

Within seconds the lead raft had entered the white water. At first contact, it veered wildly to one side and was thrown roughly into the air. Miraculously it landed right side up, but was immediately caught by the relentless current and carried with express-train speed toward a narrow ledge of rock.

Sandy started to raise his hand and strained forward. Beside him, Mike cried out a warning. But before they could move, the tiny, fragile-looking craft had skimmed past the edge of the rock, missing it by inches, and was careening wildly down the last of the rapids toward a quiet pool in the bend of the river. Scurrying gaily behind the leader came three others and finally a fourth.

Mike sighed audibly. "Wow! So that's Kindergarten Rapids! Where do I go to get sent back a class?"

Sandy leaned down to pick up the raft and paddle he had brought with him. "Come on, boy,

might as well face the music and get our first lesson."

"All right," Mike grumbled, reaching for his equipment. "Just write my mother a nice letter. That's all I ask."

They trudged along in silence for a few steps. "Say, who is it we're supposed to look up?" Mike suddenly asked.

"Doug Henderson. He's the son of the man who rented us the cabin. Mr. Henderson said he'd be expecting us."

"I sure hope he knows what he's talking about!"

"According to Mr. Henderson, he's been running these rapids ever since he was seven years old."

Mike shook his head. "What some people will do for fun!"

The boys scrambled down the side of a steep embankment and approached the river. Crowded around a homemade dock directly ahead of them were several boys about ten or eleven years of age. Except for the youngest ones, who had on bathing trunks, all the boys were dressed in faded dungarees and T-shirts. Sandy and Mike ambled up to the dock and hailed a sturdy lad who was busy inflating his canvas raft.

"Do you know where we can find Doug Henderson?" Sandy asked.

The boy looked up and pointed. "Sure. Hey, Doug!"

A friendly face covered with freckles popped up from the other side of the dock. "Hi!" he called. "You the fellows that Pop sent over?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sandy saw Mike's jaw drop. "That's right." He smiled. "Think you can teach us to handle these?" He held out a raft.

The boy rubbed his hands along the sides of his dungarees and vaulted over a wooden piling sunk into the ground. "Sure!" he cried confidently. "Nothing to it!"

"So he's been running these rapids ever since he was seven years old!" Mike murmured. "That gives him about three weeks' experience."

As usual Mike was exaggerating. Doug, though small, was nearly eleven and he had all the assurance of a qualified expert in his field.

"You're going down the Lost River." It was more a statement than a question.

"That's right."

The boy shook his head in envy. "Lucky. It's wonderful country. Have you got a guide yet?"

"My father's out arranging for one now," Mike said.

"Hope he gets a good one. It makes all the difference." He pronounced this judgment with so much grown-up seriousness that Sandy had to fight to suppress a smile.

"You're right," he acknowledged, "but it won't make any difference to us unless we can learn how to shoot some of those rapids."

"All right, let's have one of your rafts."

Sandy handed over his and watched carefully as Doug Henderson flopped it on the ground.

"Now the important thing to remember is balance. Sit in the middle of the raft with your knees wedged tight against both sides—like this." He hopped in and demonstrated.

"Don't tense your body but keep your legs firm. Make sure your middle is loose so you can turn your shoulders in both directions. You want to be ready to handle trouble no matter what side it comes from. Okay so far?"

Sandy and Mike nodded gravely.

"You fellows know how to handle a canoe?" They both nodded a second time. "Good. Then we don't have to go into steering. Come on over here and I'll tell you about the rapids."

He led the way down to the end of the rickety dock toward the white water and launched into a lecture that took nearly twenty minutes.

It turned out that Doug knew every ripple and wave in the Kindergarten Rapids. He told them what to expect in the way of currents, where a whirlpool was likely to form, how to fight clear of the rocks and what to do if they got thrown into the water.

When he finished, he turned to them with finality. "And now you're ready to try it," he announced. "You'll get dumped but don't let that bother you. Everybody does. But you've got to remember to take it easy. If you stiffen all up, you're bound to tip over. Ready?"

Mike scratched his head and shrugged his shoulders. "Nope. But I guess that doesn't make any difference. Who's first?"

"We'll all go together," their freckle-faced instructor ordered. "You two go on ahead and I'll bring up the rear. That way I can tell you what you did wrong when we get through the run."

"*If* we get through," Mike muttered, sliding his raft into the water.

"Oh, you can't help getting through," Doug called out reassuringly. "Even if you're dead, the current'll carry you."

"Thanks a lot," Mike said as he got ready to cast off. "That takes a big load off my mind." The

next instant the current was carrying him into the middle of the river.

Sandy took a firm grip on the sides of his raft and followed. Even as he scrambled to keep his balance, he could feel the river tugging insistently at his tiny craft. Bracing his knees, he reached down gingerly to grab his paddle. The current was much stronger than he had imagined.

Suddenly a crosscurrent caught him amidships and sent him rolling violently, like a cork on an angry sea. Every muscle in his body tightened as he swayed back and forth to keep upright. Then he remembered Doug's advice: "Don't fight the current. Ride with it and relax."

Sandy took a deep breath and forced himself to ease up. Almost immediately he felt more confident. The rocking motion continued, but he was on top of each swell, his entire body moving gracefully with the raft and not against it.

Just as he was beginning to enjoy the ride, he heard the first rushing noise of the rapids and he was catapulted forward. It crossed his mind that this was like going off a high diving board; there was no turning back. Then suddenly he was too busy to think. Everything became a series of reflex actions.

The raft spun with a snap and he was shooting off to the right. Sandy leaned back on his haunches and stabbed the paddle down into the water at his left. The shaft bit into the river and slowly hauled him back on course.

He heard a loud smack and felt himself flying through a curtain of white spray. There was a sickening bump and he was back on the river, riding furiously through a world of roaring noise and bone-jarring motion. A long ledge of rock loomed up ahead. Sandy brought the paddle up and pushed with all the strength in his shoulders.

His little raft bounced away and was flung sideways into a channel between two ledges. Doug had told them that this was the fastest point in the rapids and he was right. Sandy's raft quivered like a live animal as it shot through the funnel of rushing water, twisting steadily to the left.

Further and further it leaned until water licked hungrily over the sides. Sandy knew he had to right himself quickly and jammed all his weight down on his right knee. As he did, an invisible hand seemed to pluck at him and he felt himself pitch over. The paddle shot from his hand, and in the next moment the waters of Salmon River closed over his head.

The current carried him, bouncing him around

like an old sock in a washing machine, for another thirty yards. Finally he was swept into a pool of relatively quiet water. He cut for the surface, blinked the water out of his eyes and looked up to see a grinning Doug Henderson sitting calmly in his raft, fishing for Sandy's lost paddle.

"Nice try!" Doug nodded approvingly. "But you got too tense toward the end. Head for shore and we'll go through again."

Sandy flashed the boy a grin and struck out for the near bank where Mike, looking mournful and disgusted with himself, was hauling himself out of the water. As Sandy reached shore, Mike leaned down and held out a hand.

"I won't need a drink for a week," Mike announced, pulling Sandy up beside him. "I just managed to swallow half the river. A couple more tries like that and there won't be any rapids to go through."

Sandy ran a hand through his dripping hair and looked back at the rapids. Half a dozen rafts were shooting through them with ease. He shook his head in admiration. "Look at them," he said purposefully. "If they can do it, so can we."

Mike nodded vehemently. "Now you're talking. Let's go!"

Two hours and over a dozen tries later, Doug

was ready to graduate both of them from the Kindergarten Rapids. "See," he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of finality, "all it takes is a little practice. You fellows could get through there now blindfolded."

"Maybe," Mike admitted. "But I'll wait for a while before I try it."

They were standing near the dock, toweling themselves vigorously after four successful runs in a row, pleased at having mastered a new skill. The crowd had grown since early morning and, along with the younger boys, there were a number of older teen-agers dressed in flashy cowboy boots and sombreros. The older boys eyed Sandy and Mike from under their hats.

"Who are the characters?" Mike demanded.

Doug squinted over at them and made a wry face. "Oh, those! Don't pay any attention to them. I guess they heard you were around and came over to see the fun."

"Well, the show's over," Sandy said as he picked up his raft. "We've got to get back to your father's."

"I'll go along with you," Doug said. Suddenly he stopped and ran forward. "Hey!" he cried. "That's my paddle!"

One of the older boys was walking away with

Doug's ash-wood paddle. He stopped when he heard the challenge and turned insolently.

"Prove it," he snapped.

Doug planted himself in front of the boy and made a grab for the handle. "There's a notch up there on the hand grip. Give it to me and I'll show you."

The older boy winked at his companions and held up one hand. "I'll look," he said. Carefully shielding the handle so that Doug couldn't see it, he stared down at the wood. When he looked up, he was grinning. "You're wrong, kid. There's no notch. Now beat it."

Sandy felt a sudden surge of anger as he moved forward to stand beside Doug. "Let me take a look at it," he said slowly. He could feel his face flush in an attempt to hold down his temper.

The older boy turned to Sandy and stared at him rudely. A faint smile twisted at the corner of his mouth. "Well, well," he drawled. "A real river expert, now, eh? Know all about rafts and paddles and such. Little Doug here got you through the course."

"He did all right," Sandy snapped. "Now, let's see the paddle."

"Are you going to fight for it?" The question came as a mocking taunt.

"If I have to."

The older boy made a clicking sound with his tongue and shook his head reproachfully. "That's no way to act. Suppose we settle this with a little bet."

"What kind?"

The older boy dug the paddle into the ground and leaned on it easily. "Now that you're such an ace in white water, let's you and me go through some rapids. Whoever gets dumped loses. The winner gets to keep the paddle."

Sandy shook his head firmly. "The paddle doesn't belong to either of us, win or lose."

"Afraid?" The question came like a slap in the face.

"No."

"I think you are."

Sandy breathed heavily, but managed to keep his temper. "All right," he said, biting off each word separately. "I'll go through any rapids with you. But we'll settle the business about the paddle afterwards."

"Done!"

Doug shook his head and grabbed Sandy's arm. "Don't do it!" he pleaded. "He's not going to take you down the Kindergarten."

"That's right," the older boy nodded. "I

wouldn't ask an expert like you to go down a playground for kids. We'll try something more interesting."

Mike moved up beside Sandy and grabbed his shoulder. "Take it easy, Sandy," he said softly. "Don't get stampeded into anything."

Sandy's face was white and stubborn. He shook his head doggedly. "Thanks, Mike, but this is the way I have to do it." He turned to the older boy. "Where is this white water of yours?"

"It's right down the bend of the river near a place called Dog Leg Falls."

There was a gasp from Doug. "Don't do it, Sandy!" he begged. "Forget about the paddle. You don't know that part of the river. Two men got drowned there last year."

Sandy looked steadily into the older boy's grinning face, then walked over and picked up his raft and paddle.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he announced in a quiet voice.

CHAPTER THREE

Dog Leg Falls

THE BOY standing opposite Sandy grunted. "Okay, champ," he said mockingly. "Follow me." He swung the paddle up over his shoulder and was halfway up the embankment when Mike's voice rang out.

"Just keep walking. We'll find our own way." Mike was amazed at the edge in his words. He hadn't realized he was so angry.

The boy stiffened in exaggerated surprise and turned. He did it so slowly that it was more of an insult than an acknowledgment. A sneering smile played over his face as he stared at Mike.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Another county heard from. Maybe you'd like to . . ."

"Cut that kind of talk and get out of here!" Mike's tone was curt and hard. He took a few steps up to the boy and looked at him squarely.

The boy dangled the paddle carelessly from one hand and came down a few steps toward Mike. "You wouldn't be thinking about running out—now would you?"

"I don't think I'd ask that question if I were you." Mike's tone was deceptively soft but there was no mistaking the fire in his eyes. He glanced over at the boy's paddle. It was swinging in a wider arc, drawing closer to him with each step. "And I'd put that paddle down before somebody gets hurt."

For a moment Mike thought the boy was going to charge him. He shifted his weight and got himself ready, but the attack never came. The paddle suddenly stopped as the boy spun around on his heel and moved back up the embankment, motioning for his friends to follow. Silently they trooped along.

Mike took a deep breath and relaxed. Then he turned and joined Sandy and Doug at the dock.

"Whew!" Doug whistled admiringly. "You really gave it to him!"

"It didn't take much, Doug," Mike replied,

keeping his eyes on Sandy's worried face. "Hey, Sandy," he said softly. "You sure you want to go through with this?"

Sandy flashed him an amused look. "Want me to run away?"

"No, but . . ."

"Then I guess that's it. I'm in too far to back down now." Sandy reached out for his raft. "The only thing I need now is some information. How about it, Doug?" he asked. "Do I get a briefing on those rapids?"

Doug shuffled over to Sandy, one toe digging into the piled-up sand along the dock. "Sandy . . ." he began in a troubled voice.

Sandy held up a hand. "That's enough," he said good-naturedly. "The only lecture I want to hear from you is how to get myself through those rapids I've let myself in for."

Doug stared up at him in momentary indecision. "All right," he said. "But let's wait till we get there."

Dog Leg Falls was about a mile upstream from the Kindergarten Rapids, in a wild and barren part of the river.

Mike took one look at the wild water, plunging

noisily through the funnel of rocks, and smiled weakly over at Sandy. "Wonder where you turn off the faucet?" But it wasn't much of a joke and nobody laughed.

Down by the falls—which weren't really falls at all, but a series of turbulent runs of water—the banks of the river closed in on the channel like two jaws, wrenching it violently around in a sharp L-shaped turn. Through this narrow trough, the water snarled and fought its way, cascading over the rocks at the bend in towering sheets of spray.

On any other day, Sandy thought to himself, the rugged beauty and awesome power of the river at Dog Leg Falls would make an exciting spectacle. On this particular day, however, it looked vicious and threatening.

Sandy tore his eyes away from the river and forced himself to listen to what Doug Henderson was saying.

". . . there's really only one bad place. It's just at the turn. See how the river curves to the left?"

Sandy shaded his eyes and peered over at the spray. He nodded silently.

"Well, the current will try to pull you over to those rocks on the right. You mustn't let that happen. 'Cause if you get dumped too near the rocks, there's an undertow that'll grab you."

"Won't it carry me along through the channel?"

Doug shook his head. "No, it won't. It'll tangle you up in the rocks. They look solid from here, but they're not. There are all sorts of crevices and things, worn out by the water pounding against them. That's why it's so dangerous."

There was a puzzled look on Sandy's face. "I don't get it."

"The crevices," Doug explained patiently, "can catch you just like a trap. You can put your foot in one of them and never get it out. It'll hold you under the water until you—" He faltered and looked away.

Sandy nodded in grim understanding. "How do I keep away from them?"

"When you enter the channel stay over to the left as far as you can. Keep steering to the left no matter what the current does. If you're over far enough, you'll make it with about three feet to spare. Think you've got it?"

"I think so. Let's get this thing over with."

"You're sure you're all set?" Mike asked anxiously.

"Yep."

Mike held out a hand. "Good luck, Sandy," he said solemnly.

Sandy, who looked surprisingly cheerful,

grinned confidently. "There's nothing to it. All I have to do is remember what Doug told me. Come on."

Sandy led the way down to the water where about twenty silent boys were gathered in tense expectation. Mike took a place near them and watched Sandy wade a foot or two into the river. Standing by helplessly, he had an overpowering urge to shout out, to stop the competition that was about to take place. But before he could make a move, Sandy turned, threw Mike a wink and swung into his raft. A second later he was floating out from shore. The older boy pushed off directly behind Sandy.

With Sandy in the lead, the two rafts shot toward the narrow opening of Dog Leg Falls. From where he stood, Mike could see that Sandy was holding the course Doug had charted. The tiny raft trembled and tugged to the right, but Sandy held her steady.

Mike felt a small hand grip his elbow with surprising strength. "He's going in just right." Doug's voice was breathless with excitement.

Mike nodded and leaned forward. "Come on, Sandy," he heard himself murmur. "You're doing great." Suddenly the two rafts disappeared in a boiling cloud of white spray. His muscles stiff

with tension, Mike strained to pick out the bobbing rafts.

Doug spotted them before he did. "He's okay!" he shouted. "That's it, Sandy!"

Mike saw them the next instant. They were both leaning into the dangerous turn. Sandy's raft hugged the left-hand side of the channel, well away from the sharp wall of rocks to his right. In another moment, he would be through. Mike felt his fingernails dig into the palms of his hands as he mentally fought the white water along with Sandy.

"He's rounding it! There's room to spare!" Beside him, Doug was dancing with excitement. "Look at him go!"

Suddenly there was a gasp from the boys crowded along the shore. Mike's eyes widened with horror. The boy behind Sandy had stopped steering his raft. He had shifted his position and was leaning ahead recklessly, a paddle in his outstretched hand.

"What's he doing?" Mike yelled.

"He's trying to tip Sandy over!" Doug shouted. His voice trailed off as he watched the paddle snake out and jab at Sandy's raft.

Mike stared with growing uneasiness as the two rafts slowly began to spin. Faster and faster they

whipped around, both boys now trying desperately to keep their balance and stay on course.

At that distance, with both rafts floundering through towering walls of water, it was difficult to tell which raft was Sandy's. Mike fought down an impulse to yell a warning when he saw one of the rafts steadily tip higher in the water.

"He's going to spill!" came a cry.

Almost as if that were a signal, the raft shuddered and flipped over. There was a flash of a figure flailing the water and then, over by the deadly rocks of Dog Leg Falls, a head appeared.

"He's caught!" Doug's face was white and frightened. "He'll drown!"

The second raft, meanwhile, was still afloat and coming around the turn fast. With a final leap, it shook itself free of the white water and skidded to safety.

Mike forced himself to hunt for the figure in the water. Was it Sandy? Or the other boy? There was a movement of color in the seething foam near the rocks, and then out into the quiet part of the river popped a paddle, an overturned raft and, following close behind, the head of a swimmer, striking for the far shore.

Sandy wouldn't do that, Mike thought to himself. He'd head for the near shore. It must be the

other boy! He swung around and squinted at the lone raft floating safely in the middle of the river. Whoever was in it was trying to fish something out of the water.

"He made it!" Doug yelled, dancing in excitement. "It's Sandy! He's all right!"

Suddenly Mike was laughing. Despite the dirty trick at the end, Sandy had won out. It was the other boy who had fallen in—not Sandy. It was a lucky thing he escaped with nothing worse than a thorough soaking.

"Come on!" Mike yelled. "He's coming in for a landing!" Together, Mike and Doug sprinted down the bank of the river to meet the raft before it touched shore.

"Hey!" yelled Doug, breaking stride for a moment. "What's he got in his hand?"

As Sandy guided his raft toward them Mike saw him grin and wave something in the air. Then all at once he knew what it was.

"It's your paddle, Doug," he chuckled. "Sandy picked it up out of the water. Don't you remember? That's what this whole thing was supposed to be about. Your paddle!"

Laughing as they ran, the two of them splashed out into the river to welcome Sandy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eagle Plume

"WELL, MIKE," Mr. Cook said as he settled down on a porch chair in front of the cabin the Hendersons had rented them. "Think you can last till dinner?"

Mike, who was stretched out contentedly on a hammock slung between corner posts, opened one eye sleepily. "Depends on what day," he said.

"I meant tonight."

Mike held up a hand in protest. "Oh no, please! I won't be able to touch a bite till next Tuesday." He sighed happily. "You know, it's a real pleasure to meet a woman like Mrs. Henderson. She never batted an eye when I asked for thirds."

"You sent her into a state of shock, most likely,"

Sandy ventured. "She couldn't believe it after what you packed away."

"I couldn't believe it myself," Mike agreed, stretching lazily. "I must have lost my head. Oh, well," he said, smothering a yawn, "I'm just a poor kid who didn't know the ropes. Give me another chance, officer. I'll go straight."

"All right," Sandy said severely. "Bread and water for three days. Next case."

"Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you. I'll never forget you for this."

"Say," interrupted Mike's father, putting his long legs up on the porch railing. "If I can break into your act for a moment, I'd like to find out how things went this morning. We were so busy talking about hunting at lunch that I forgot to find out if you got your feet wet in some white water."

Sandy and Mike exchanged glances. On their way back to the Hendersons' they had decided it would be just as well to skip over the experience at Dog Leg Falls.

"Why, sure," Mike replied casually. "We went through three or four times."

"Was Doug a good teacher?"

"The best."

Mr. Cook groped for pipe and tobacco pouch.

"I thought Doug acted sort of funny all through lunch. Excited is more what I mean." He cupped his hand over the pipe bowl and began to fill it. "Anything happen this morning?"

Sandy caught Mike's eye as he shook his head. "No," he said. "Nothing special."

"Hmmm." Mr. Cook was drawing on his pipe. "You knew, didn't you," he said between puffs, "that I'd hired a guide?"

Mike propped himself up on one elbow. "No, Dad, you didn't tell us."

"Well, I have. Fellow Mr. Henderson recommended."

"Who is he? What's his name?"

Mr. Cook pulled his feet down from the railing and stood up. There was a look of amusement on his face as if he was enjoying a private joke. "If you turn around, Mike, I'll introduce you. He's been standing behind you for the last two minutes."

The two boys whirled around in surprise. Standing near the porch was a short, dark man with deep-set brown eyes. His straight black hair, worn long, was carefully brushed back and held in place by a battered gray felt hat. A red checked shirt, well-worn suspenders and a loose pair of trousers tucked into high-topped shoes completed

his outfit. There was a feeling of relaxed strength and quiet power about his bearing that reminded the boys of the mountains that towered in the distance beyond the river. He looked as if he were carved out of the same stuff—solid granite.

Mr. Cook shifted his pipe and extended his right hand. "Come on up and meet the boys. Mike," he said, "I'd like you to meet Chief Eagle Plume."

Mike almost pitched forward on his face as he scrambled out of the hammock. The Indian glided over the porch steps and suddenly he was standing next to all three of them. Sandy had never seen a man move so effortlessly.

"And this," Mr. Cook went on, "is Sandy Steele, the third member of our expedition."

The Indian nodded gravely as he acknowledged the introduction. Mike, who was clearly puzzling over what to say next, decided the proper thing to do was bow formally.

"Heap glad you come with us," he said solemnly. "We go trip together, we catchum plenty—uh—" He glanced over at his father for some support, but Mr. Cook was busy with his pipe.

Mike gritted his teeth and plunged on. "Catchum plenty—ah—"

"Scalps?" the Indian suggested helpfully.

Mike blushed furiously. "Yes, I mean—no—"

There was a flash of white as the Indian broke into an amused laugh. "Sure hate to disillusion you, Mike. But that sort of thing's a little out of date."

Mike stared at him with a dazed expression. "But I . . ." He grinned sheepishly. "I thought you were an Indian. That name, Chief Eagle Plume . . ."

"Oh, I am—a full-blooded Blackfoot. And your father got the name right. It's Eagle Plume, only most people call me Joe. It's simpler." He threw Mike a friendly grin. "You wouldn't guess it, but I even went to college."

"No kidding! Where?"

"Agricultural school in Montana."

"So you're a farmer," Mr. Cook said.

Joe shook his head. "No, I studied animal husbandry. I figure on owning a cattle ranch some day. Got one all picked out." He gestured to a chair. "Mind if I sit down?"

"No, no. Here." Mike pushed over a chair.

Joe lowered himself comfortably and took off his hat. "Incidentally," he said, "last time I used that 'Me heap big Injun' routine was when I was hired as an extra by a movie company."

Sandy moved over to the porch railing and hoisted himself up against a post. "Gee, a movie star! Were you a real bad Indian?"

Joe laughed. "I was a real dead Indian, that's for sure. I got killed eight different times in that picture. Some fun. The only trouble was that I had to pretend to be a Crow Indian."

"What's bad about that?"

"Nothing really, I suppose. It's just that Crows and Blackfeet never got along too well together. Our ancestors fought over the same hunting ground for years. We were always at war."

Mr. Cook scratched another match along the arm of his chair. "But that's all finished now, isn't it? There's no bad feeling any more."

Joe took a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and huddled over a light. "You better not pay any attention to me. I just happen to know some Crows I'm not too fond of."

"But that's personal," objected Mr. Cook. "Nothing to do with the whole nation."

Joe hooked one leg over the other and frowned at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "Yeah," he said softly. "It's personal, all right. And mutual." A look of hard anger clouded over his face, then disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. "Well," he said after a pause, his good humor

apparently restored, "so you're going down Lost River to meet Hank Dawson?"

Mr. Cook's face lit up. "Do you know Hank?"

The Indian shook his head. "No, but I've heard of him. Where's he meeting you?"

"At Mormon Crossing."

"Dad," Mike interrupted, "I've been meaning to ask you about that place. I thought the Mormons settled Utah—around Salt Lake City."

"They did," his father answered. "But some of them didn't like it."

"And moved on," Sandy chimed in.

Mr. Cook turned to Sandy in surprise. "Right! How did you know?"

"That last day before we left Oakland, Mike and I went downtown to do some last-minute shopping. Remember?"

"Sure."

"When we finished Mike said he wanted a soda. With Mike, that's a full hour's proposition. I didn't want any, so I said I'd meet him at the library."

"Squealer," muttered Mike.

Joe looked at Mike in amazement. "You mean it takes him an hour to drink a soda?"

Sandy shrugged. "You know how it is. One soda leads to another."

"I see." Joe nodded gravely. "He drinks."

Sandy sighed and nodded his head. "That's about the size of it."

Joe looked over at Mike sympathetically. "Poor fellow."

"Hey, wait a minute," cried Mike. "I'm not as bad as that. I can take them or leave them alone."

"That's what they all say," his father said. He turned back to Sandy. "But what's this got to do with you knowing about the Mormons?"

"Well, I went to the library," Sandy explained, "and looked up Mormon Crossing. I was just curious about the name."

"What did it say?" Joe suddenly sat forward, looking watchful.

"It seems there was this party of Mormons on their way west from Ohio. They didn't stop in Utah, as so many of them did. They pushed on farther west, planning to join the settlement in Nevada that was set up in 1849. It's not clear whether they never got there, or whether they got there and turned back. The last anyone ever heard about them, they were in Idaho. Mormon Crossing was where they forded the Lost River."

"What do you mean—the last anybody heard of them?" Mike wanted to know.

Sandy threw up his hands. "They vanished. The

theory is the Indians massacred them. But nobody knows for sure."

"They were massacred, all right," declared Joe, staring off into space. "Every last one of them was killed."

Sandy frowned in bewilderment. "How do you know that?"

Joe looked up sharply. "What?"

"I said, how do you know? There weren't any records. I asked."

"Oh," said Joe, reaching for another cigarette. "I mean, that's the way it must have happened. It was pretty wild country then, and it all belonged to my people. I'm afraid they didn't take too kindly to strangers."

"In any event," said Sandy, changing the subject, "that's how Mormon Crossing got its name."

"And that's where we're going," said Mike, throwing himself back on the hammock. "Sounds like a real garden spot. Any of your relatives still hang around there, Joe? Let me know and I'll keep out of their way."

Joe grinned and shook his head. "We're all nice and tame now, Mike," he said.

"You never go on the warpath any more?" Mike made it sound as if he were disappointed.

"Just little ones. We kinda yell in whispers."

"To keep in practice, you mean?"

"That's it," said Joe, throwing back his head in a laugh. "Then we're always ready in case another movie company wants to hire us."

"Don't take any jobs for a month, Joe," Mr. Cook said as he leaned over to knock the ashes out of his pipe. "You're all booked up."

"Suits me."

"When do we start, Dad?" Mike asked idly.

"I thought in about two days."

"Two days!" The Indian was suddenly on his feet and over by Mr. Cook. Again it crossed Sandy's mind that Joe moved with the grace of a cat. "I don't mean to speak out of turn or anything," he said, "but why waste all that time?"

"There's a lot to be done," Mr. Cook pointed out mildly. "The gear's got to be sorted and packed in trip boxes. The boats have to be loaded—"

Joe sat down on the porch railing. "I can do it this afternoon."

"It's a big job."

Joe shrugged. "I'll handle it."

Mr. Cook looked up at Joe curiously. "You seem in an awful hurry to get out of here."

Now Joe became flustered. "No," he stammered.

"That's not it. It's just that . . . that every day you stay here is a day lost."

Sandy remembered their appointment at Mormon Crossing. "What about Hank Dawson? We're not due to meet him for another five days."

"Oh, that's no problem," Mr. Cook replied. "Hank's probably there now—getting in some fishing."

"Then there's nothing to hold you?" It was Joe again.

"No," Mr. Cook conceded. "Just the problem of getting ready."

Joe stared down at the porch flooring. "Well, suit yourself," he said, but it was clear he was not too happy about it.

"Why don't we go!" cried Mike suddenly, bounding up from his hammock.

Mr. Cook was still unconvinced. "We have to check our ammunition and sight in the guns. We haven't had a chance to do that yet."

"Why don't you do it right now?" Joe suggested eagerly. "You go on downriver while I get things organized here. We'll be ready by morning. I guarantee it."

"Well," Mr. Cook said dubiously. "What do you boys think about it?"

"I'm all for it," Mike asserted.

"Sandy?"

Sandy nodded. "The sooner the better for me."

Mr. Cook laughed. "Okay, Joe. You win. I'll get the guns and you do the rest."

"Yes, sir!" Joe grinned as he vaulted down the steps. "I'll go see about the boats." The next instant he was gone and running down the path toward the river.

Mr. Cook watched him go and turned to the boys with a puzzled expression. "Did you get the feeling there was something odd about all that?" he asked.

"I sure did," Sandy said emphatically. "It started when I began talking about Mormon Crossing."

Mr. Cook nodded in agreement and led the way into their cabin. "Let's take the guns a mile or two upstream and chew this thing over while we're walking. Frankly," he concluded with a frown, "I don't think I like it much."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sighting In

AFTER HALF AN HOUR of speculation, neither Sandy, Mike nor Mr. Cook could come up with a reasonable explanation for Joe's strange behavior. But, as Mr. Cook said, that wasn't too surprising. "We don't have too much to go on," he pointed out.

The three of them were walking along the south shore of the Salmon River, not far from Dog Leg Falls. The country there was perfect for their purpose: it was clear of woods and reasonably deserted. Sandy was carrying several boxes of shells and four or five sheets of white plastic material, painted over with a red bull's-eye. Mike had a small bale of packed straw he had found in Mr. Henderson's stable, and Mr. Cook was lugging two gun cases.

"Let's go over it once more," Sandy insisted. "We know this much. Joe wants to leave here in a hurry and Mormon Crossing means something to him."

"You *think* it means something to him," Mr. Cook corrected.

"We agreed that he began to act funny as soon as I started talking about it. And besides, he seemed to be pretty sure about what happened to that party of Mormons."

"But, Sandy," Mike protested, "they were massacred more than a hundred years ago. How could that make any difference to Joe now?"

"That's my whole point," Sandy explained. "How did he know it was a massacre? They might have died of starvation or any number of things. Why was he so sure?"

The three of them walked on, lost in thought. It was Mike who finally broke the silence. "This may be crazy," he began, "but Joe could have some inside information."

"How do you mean?" his father asked.

"He's a Blackfoot," Mike explained earnestly. "This used to be Blackfoot country. Maybe the story about the Mormon massacre was handed down within the tribe—you know, from father to son—until it reached Joe." He shifted the bale of

straw to his other arm and began to talk more quickly. "I know that Indians are part of *our* life now, but the tribe still means something to them."

"You're right." Mr. Cook nodded. "They have a strong sense of tribal identification. It's quite possible that each tribe passes its own legends along from generation to generation. Indians don't keep any records, so naturally it wouldn't be in the library. Joe might have heard about the massacre from his father or some of the elders of the tribe."

Sandy still wasn't satisfied. "That doesn't answer the question about why he wanted to leave in such a hurry."

"No," Mr. Cook had to agree. "It doesn't." He started to say more, but just then the path took a sharp turn and they came face to face with the spectacle of the river gathering itself for its rush through Dog Leg Falls.

Mr. Cook stood and watched the lashing water of the rapids with a look of admiration. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

Behind his back, Sandy and Mike exchanged glances.

"That all depends," Sandy ventured uncertainly.

Mr. Cook turned and smiled. "I guess it does,

Sandy. I sure would hate to try to battle through it on a raft, wouldn't you?"

Sandy coughed and turned away. "Wouldn't dream of it," he muttered. "Er—don't you think we'd better start to work?"

Mr. Cook tore himself away from the sight of the rapids and nodded. "Good idea. Let's look for a shooting range."

"Over there." Sandy pointed. "There's a nice little hill and about fifty yards of clearing."

"All right," Mr. Cook said, picking up the gun cases. "You boys set up the target."

"Wouldn't dream of going through those rapids, eh?" Mike muttered out of the corner of his mouth as he and Sandy walked over to the hill together.

Sandy grinned back at him. "What did you want me to say? That I do it all the time for laughs?" He watched Mike put down the straw bale and prop it solidly against the side of the hill. "Besides," he whispered, "you know something?"

"What?"

"I'm afraid I may dream about it some night —and wake up screaming."

"Come on!" a voice yelled. "You two fellows do more talking than a pair of old ladies!"

"Okay, Dad!" Mike shouted. "We'll be ready in a minute."

Quickly he helped Sandy drape the plastic cloth over the bale so that the concentric rings of the bull's-eye faced Mr. Cook.

"Let's weight it down with some stones," Sandy suggested. "One or two shots and it'll probably fly right off."

"Good idea."

"Boys!" It was Mr. Cook again. "Pace off fifty yards toward me."

They did as they were told, and in a few moments they were standing beside Mike's father, who was bending over the Remington .721. "There," he said, after the last shell slipped into place. "We're all set." He held the rifle out to Sandy. "Care to try it?" he asked.

Sandy took the gun and ran his hand down the smooth wood finish of the stock. Checking to make sure the safety lock was on, he cradled it in his arms and turned to Mr. Cook.

"You know," he said with a puzzled grin, "I'm not exactly sure what I'm supposed to do."

"Ever shoot one of these before?"

Sandy shook his head. "A .22 is about the only thing I've ever handled. How does this gadget

work?" He pointed to a telescopic sight mounted on top of the gun stock.

"Just like a regular sight," Mr. Cook explained. "It's detachable, you see. If you're shooting short distances, you take it off and use the notch sight right on the barrel. But if your target is—oh, let's say 250 yards off, then you screw on this telescope. Take a look through it and tell me what you see."

Sandy hoisted the gun up against his shoulder and squinted through the round glass end of the scope. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "That target looks as if it's right on top of me."

"Well, it's a telescope, you know. What else do you see?"

"Two tiny cross hairs that intersect at right angles just about in the center of the circle."

"Right. Now what you want to do is line up the intersection of those cross hairs with the target. Got that?"

Sandy nodded and, shifting his aim slightly, he focused on the exact center of the bull's-eye. "I'm on," he said, holding the position as best he could.

"Okay," Mr. Cook said. "Shoot."

Sandy took a deep breath and curled his finger slowly around the trigger. He braced himself for the blast and recoil, every muscle poised and tense,

concentrating on the circle of red that filled the sight.

Suddenly he felt an insistent tap on his shoulder. He jerked around to find Mike's grinning face staring into his.

"Hate to bother you, Daniel Boone," Mike said apologetically, "but you'll do better with that thing off."

"What thing?"

Mike reached out and flipped off the safety catch. "Okay, sport," he said. "Fire away!"

Sandy gave an embarrassed grunt and nodded. He brought up the rifle a second time and tucked it into the hollow of his shoulder. Resting his cheek against the curve of the stock, he closed down gently on the trigger. The rifle bucked and roared in his hand. Sandy threw the bolt and pumped another shell into place.

"How did I do?" he asked.

Mr. Cook peered at the target through a pair of field glasses. "About five inches off center. Try again."

Sandy brought the rifle up. "Want me to allow for it?"

"No, no," Mr. Cook said quickly. "Aim for the target."

Sandy spread his feet a little farther apart and took a comfortable stance. "Here goes."

The rifle barked again. "Same place," Mr. Cook announced. "You sure you were centered?"

"As far as I could tell," Sandy said, a little annoyed with himself for missing a second time.

"Let Mike have a try at it."

Sandy handed the rifle over to Mike and stepped back. Two shots rang out in quick succession. Mike looked over at his father questioningly.

"I guess that proves it," came the answer. "Here, take a look." He ducked his head through the strap of the binoculars and turned the glasses over to Sandy.

Sandy swung over to the target and focused in on four neat holes clustered close together about five inches to the right of the bull's-eye.

"I don't get it," he said, lowering the glasses. "How come we're missing?"

"The sights are off," Mr. Cook explained. "A little adjusting will fix that." He reached into a side pocket on one of the gun cases and pulled out a screw driver. "Now, let's see," he said, glancing over at the target. "At fifty yards, a minute of angle has a value of about half an inch. Each click on this scope is equal to two minutes of angle. That would make—" he pursed his lips

as he made the mental calculation—"ahh—five clicks to bring her in line." He shook his head and pushed his hat back off his forehead. "That's too much. We'll have to adjust the windage screws on the scope's mount." Squatting on his haunches, he began to manipulate two screws on either side of the sight.

"Hey, Dad!" Mike cut in. "You left me out in left field somewhere. How about filling us in?" He turned to Sandy. "Do you know what's going on?" he asked.

"I think so," Sandy said as he looked over Mr. Cook's shoulder. "According to what we saw through the sight, we were right on target. The only trouble was, the sight didn't match up with the barrel of the gun. It's just sitting on top of the gun and it must have twisted around to one side. Right now your father is trying to get the two of them back together so that what we see is what we shoot at."

"That makes sense," Mike conceded. "But how do you know which way to turn the scope? Do you swivel it around to the left or to the right?"

"That's easy." Sandy grabbed a twig and drew a small rectangle on the ground. "Here's your scope. And there—" he ran a dotted straight line

out to a spot he marked with an *X*—"that's the target. You see the scope's pointing right at it."

Mike nodded and Sandy went on.

"The four shots all fell about here." He punched four holes to the right of the *X*.

"Which means," Mike added, "that the gun was over to the right in relation to the line of sight through the scope."

"You got it," Sandy nodded.

"So," Mike went on, "in order to get the scope and barrel lined up together, we have to move the cross hairs over to the right."

"And there are two ways of doing that," Mr. Cook pointed out. "We can move the cross hairs *inside* the scope. Or we can move the scope itself."

"What's the difference?" Mike asked.

"One is for fine adjustments." He pointed to a knob on top of the telescopic sight. "See this?"

The boys nodded.

"This," he went on, "moves the cross hairs. And these—" he gestured to a pair of screws—"turn the whole mount any degree you want." He grinned at them. "Simple, eh?"

"One more question."

"Shoot."

"How do you know how much to turn it? All that business about a minute of angle having a

value of about half an inch at fifty yards—that's all Greek to me."

"You remember your geometry, don't you, Mike? An angle cuts off an arc. And you know how to measure an arc."

Mike looked surprised. "In minutes and degrees," he said, with sudden comprehension.

"There's your answer. Now I'll grant you," Mr. Cook added, "that I just happen to know how big an arc an angle makes at various distances. But that's only because I've been working with guns for a long time. And if I didn't know, I could always figure it out. The rest," he said, standing up, "is trial and error. Let's see how we did."

With a single easy motion, he hunched over the rifle and, in rapid succession, poured three shots into the bull's-eye. "Well?" he demanded as he straightened up.

Sandy peered through the binoculars. Three holes bunched together in the space of a dime had perforated the plastic directly above the target.

"You're right on," he announced. "But a little high."

"Good," Mr. Cook replied. "We want to be high."

"How come?" Mike demanded.

"Bullets don't go straight forever," Mr. Cook

explained. "Gravity forces them to curve down until they hit the ground. This rifle shoots a little high at fifty yards. But it'll be right on target at two hundred and fifty—and that," he pointed out, "will be about as close as you'll get to an elk." He patted the gun with evident satisfaction. "She's all set," he said. "Let's get busy on the others."

Now that the boys knew what they were doing, the work went faster. An hour and a half later, they were finishing with the last rifle.

"One more shot, Dad," begged Mike. "I'm still not happy with this one."

His father shrugged. "Suit yourself. I think she's fine."

"You watching, Sandy?" Mike called out, slinging up the gun.

"Go ahead," Sandy called.

Mike had just put his eye against the sight when Sandy yelled out a warning. "Hold it! There's somebody coming down the hill."

"He sure is running fast, whoever he is," commented Mr. Cook. "Take a look through your glasses and see if we know him."

"Sure we do," Sandy said after a pause. "It's Doug Henderson. He looks scared—almost as if somebody's chasing him."

"Hey, Doug!" Mike yelled. "Over here!"

The boy scrambled down the foot of the hill and came sprinting up to them. His face was pale and his eyes were unnaturally large.

"Is there anything wrong, Doug?" Mr. Cook asked.

The boy gasped as he struggled to catch his breath.

"It's Joe," he gulped. "Something's happened to him."

"What?" Mr. Cook's tone was sharp and worried.

Doug swallowed hard and shook his head. "Don't know," he panted. "He's hurt. Dad says for you to come. It happened while he was loading your trip boxes."

CHAPTER SIX

Joe's Story

MR. HENDERSON was waiting for them on the porch of their cabin when they arrived. "You can rest easy," he called when he saw their worried faces. "He's not hurt bad."

Mr. Cook leaped up the steps two at a time. "What happened?" he demanded.

Mr. Henderson shrugged. "Can't tell for sure. All we know is he got himself a whack on the head an' fell in the river."

"Was he knocked out?"

"Colder'n a mackerel."

"Then he could have drowned!" cried Sandy.

Mr. Henderson peered over at Sandy. "More'n likely," he agreed.

"Who fished him out?" Mr. Cook wanted to know.

Mr. Henderson rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Now there was a lucky thing," he said. " 'Bout four o'clock I told Luke—that's my hired man—to go down and check the calking on your boats. Seein' as how they ain't been in the water since last summer, I figured 'twould be a good idea to have a look at 'em. Well," he continued, refusing to be hurried, "Luke gets down to the place where I keep the boats and all of a sudden he hears a kind of a yell and a splash. Being curious like, Luke decides to have a look-see at what fell in. So he saunters on down to the river and spots three fellers actin' funny. They see him comin' and start off the other way. Luke hollers but they keep right on goin'. Injuns, he thinks they were. Course, Luke's gettin' a bit old and his eyesight ain't what it used to be, so it might not be Injuns after all. You never can tell about them things. I recollect once—it was in the summer of—"

"But what about Joe?" insisted Sandy impatiently.

Mr. Henderson shot him a reproachful glance. "I was just getting 'round to that. Seein' them

Injuns, or whatever it was, made Luke move a little faster and he gets down to the river just in time to see old Joe a-floating away."

"He was on top of the water?" Sandy asked.

"Well, no, not exactly," Mr. Henderson admitted. "He was about three, mebbe four feet down. But the current was carryin' him along right smart, y'see."

"What did Luke do?"

"He hightails it over to another dock further downstream, grabs a boat and, when Joe comes by, he fishes him out. That's about all."

"Do you think those Indians, or whatever they were, had anything to do with it?" Mr. Cook asked anxiously.

"Hard to say. Best ask Joe."

Mr. Cook moved to the door. "Let's do it now."

Mr. Henderson held out a hand. "Doc's in there with him. He said to keep everybody out till he's through."

"It's all right" came a voice from inside the house. "Come on in."

The doctor had just finished and was buttoning his jacket as Mr. Cook led the way through the front door. "Is he out of danger, Doctor?" Mr. Cook asked.

"Yes, indeed," said the doctor, reaching for his

medical bag. "He's got a nasty bump on the back of his head, but nothing serious. There's no concussion. He may be a little sick at his stomach from all the water he swallowed, but that'll pass. The only thing he needs right now is a little broth and a good night's sleep."

"He'll get both," Mr. Henderson promised.

"Good." The doctor moved to the door and turned. "You know," he said, "Joe's a mighty lucky man. If Luke had been a few minutes later, he'd be finished." He shrugged and pushed his way out. "As it is, I expect he'll be up and around by tomorrow. Goodbye. Let me know if he becomes delirious or suddenly starts to run a fever."

"We will," Mr. Cook assured him. "Goodbye, Doctor, and thanks a lot."

"Right." The doctor smiled around the room and stepped out of the cabin.

"Well," Mr. Cook said, after the doctor had gone. "I think we better ask Joe a few questions. Where is he?"

"He's in this room right here." Mr. Henderson walked over to a door and knocked gently. "Joe!" he called. "You've got company."

"Come in!" answered a voice.

Joe was sitting up in bed, wearing a red flannel nightshirt that belonged to Mr. Henderson. With

the white bandage wrapped around his head he looked even more like an Indian than he had earlier that afternoon. He smiled in welcome as he caught sight of the Cooks and Sandy. "Boy!" he said. "Am I glad to see you again! Did you get those guns sighted in?"

Mr. Cook moved to the foot of the bed. "We had just finished when we heard the news. What happened, Joe?"

The Indian made an impatient gesture with one hand. "Foolish accident. I was lining the boxes up along the dock when I thought I heard somebody call my name. I looked up and turned around. Well, I guess I must have lost my footing, because the next thing I knew I was falling in the water. Then, all of a sudden, I felt this bang on my head and all the lights went out. Cracked right into a piling, I guess." He grinned up at them. "Things like that happen sometimes. You can't do much about it."

"What about those Indians, Joe?" Mr. Cook asked quietly.

Joe's eyes narrowed and Sandy thought he saw him grow pale. "What Indians?" he said sharply.

"Luke said he thought he saw some Indians right near the place where you fell. He said they were coming away from the river after you went

in." Mr. Cook laid a slight but significant stress on the word "after."

Joe tried to dismiss the Indians with a shrug. "If they were there, I didn't see them."

"Luke yelled out," Mr. Cook continued, "but they didn't stop."

"Why should they?"

"Wouldn't you stop if somebody called?"

"That depends on who it was. Maybe they didn't hear him." He looked at Mr. Cook with an unfriendly stare. "I don't get it," he said resentfully. "What are you trying to prove?"

There was a pause as Mr. Cook dragged over a chair and sat down beside the bed. "Look, Joe," he said, "take it easy. I'm not trying to prove a thing. It's just that there are a couple of things that are bothering us." Joe waited unsmilingly for Mr. Cook to go on. "Earlier today, you mentioned some Crow Indians you didn't seem to like very much. Next, you can't wait to get started on the trip to Mormon Crossing. And finally, you almost get killed."

Joe looked thoughtfully down at the sheet. "And you think that all adds up to something?" he asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Is anybody after you, Joe? It looks a little like it."

Joe leaned back with a smile. "I have to admit it looks funny," he conceded with a chuckle. "But I'm afraid you've been reading too many mystery stories. Now," he said, settling back comfortably, "let's start from the beginning. About those three Crows—it's perfectly true I don't get along with them. But it wasn't serious enough to lead to any bloodshed. Besides, as far as I know, they're still in Montana. It's also true that I'm eager to get going. I gave you my reasons this afternoon and they still hold. Why waste time here when we can be on the river? Finally, the accident." He shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know how to explain that, except to say that it was exactly that—an accident. The Indians Luke saw were just a coincidence. I don't have the slightest idea of why they were there." Joe looked around the room and smiled disarmingly. "Sorry I can't give you a more dramatic story, but that's the truth. Okay?"

Mr. Cook stood up and moved the chair back against the wall. "All right, Joe," he said quietly. "No cross-examination."

The Indian seemed relieved. "Good," he said. "Now what time do you want to start tomorrow?"

Mr. Cook stared at Joe in astonishment. "But great Scott, Joe! You're in no shape to travel!"

"You heard what the doctor said."

"He said you'd be up and around by tomorrow, but he didn't mean for you to start downriver."

"It's better than lying around here. Besides, a little exercise will get my strength back a lot faster than a week in bed."

"Well," Mr. Cook said as he turned to go out the door, "let's see how you feel in the morning."

"I'll make you a sporting proposition," Joe called. "If I say I'm ready, will you leave?"

"All right," Mr. Cook agreed after a pause. "But don't push yourself too hard."

"Don't worry," Joe said, grinning. "And say," he shouted as Mr. Cook was closing the door, "better get to bed early tonight. I plan to be up at five-thirty."

Mr. Cook nodded and pulled the door shut. The four of them trooped back out onto the porch. "Well?" demanded Mr. Cook as he looked at each of them in turn. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Sandy muttered. "It sounds all right, but . . ."

"Exactly," Mr. Cook agreed. "His story has too many holes as far as I'm concerned."

"But why should he lie?" Mike objected. "If he's in trouble, why doesn't he tell us? Maybe we could help."

"What struck you as the fishiest part of his story?" Mr. Cook asked Sandy.

"The accident on the dock" came the prompt reply.

"It could have happened just that way," Mr. Henderson volunteered. "There's more'n a couple of rotten boards on that dock. He could've caught himself easy and pitched over."

Sandy refused to be convinced. "I doubt it," he said. "Ever notice how Joe moves? He's as graceful as a cat."

"You're right," Mr. Henderson admitted. "But I just can't bring myself to call Joe a liar. I've known him a long time."

"What do you think of him?" Mr. Cook demanded.

"As a guide or as a man?"

"Both."

"As a man I've never known him to do a dishonest thing. And as a guide, I've never known him to do a foolish one. I'd trust Joe anywhere."

"So would I," Mr. Cook agreed. "That's what makes it so funny. I like him and I trust him and yet . . ." He shook his head helplessly. "There's something he's not telling us."

"Want me to try to find another guide for you?" Mr. Henderson asked.

Mr. Cook turned to Mike and Sandy. "What do you think, boys?"

"Maybe he is mixed up in something, but I still vote we stick with him," Mike declared.

Sandy nodded his head. "I'll go along with that."

"All right," Mr. Cook said decisively. "That's decided. We'll leave as soon as Joe's ready."

"Better do what he said," Mr. Henderson advised, "and set your alarm clocks for five-thirty."

"You think he'll be ready then?"

Mr. Henderson nodded. "He's a pretty tough customer, is old Joe. When he makes up his mind to do a thing—well, it gets done."

Mr. Cook grinned and threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay. I'm convinced." He turned and started back into the cabin. "Let's get going," he said. "We've got some packing to do if we're leaving for Mormon Crossing in the morning."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cutthroats

LYING IN THE PROW of the lead boat, with his head pillowed on a rolled-up sleeping bag, Sandy watched the towering stands of green pine glide smoothly by. This was their second day on the river and they had yet to see a sign of human life. The clear, sparkling river wound through what seemed to be an endless wilderness of mountain peaks and sweet-smelling fir forests.

The fast-flowing current carried them effortlessly ahead, deeper and deeper into the wild, tangled beauty of the Lost River country. Occasionally, Joe, who was stationed at the tiller in the rear of Sandy's boat, would yell, "White water ahead!" This was the signal for Sandy to take up his paddle and brace himself firmly against the

prow. Then, as Joe steered skillfully through the suddenly turbulent water, Sandy's job was to keep the boat well away from potentially dangerous rocks by pushing out with a heavy river paddle, whose shaft was almost as thick as his wrist. Behind the first boat, Mike and his father tried to follow the course Joe set.

Only once—when Joe announced that the rapids ahead were too risky—did they have to portage. It was a long, hot job.

But most of the time they simply floated. Mr. Cook and Joe kept a hand on the tillers of their boats, while Sandy and Mike watched the scenery or sprawled lazily on their backs, drinking in the sun and the bracing mountain air.

As Sandy stretched and shifted into a more comfortable position, he could hear Mike singing in the other boat.

" 'Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play! Where seldom is heard a discouraging'— Hey, Joe!"

"What?"

"Ever see any antelopes?"

"Sure."

"What do they play?"

"Baseball mostly" came the reply. "And a little tennis, sometimes."

"Thanks. Just wondered." Mike took a breath and plunged ahead. "And the deer and the antelope play! It's baseball at night! A discouraging sight! After watching the tennis all day!"

Sandy grinned and hoisted himself up to a sitting position. "I like the original words better, Mike!" he shouted.

In the other boat, Mike assumed a posture of dignified disappointment. "That's the trouble with people like you," he replied haughtily. "You never appreciate an original talent. Why, I predict in a hundred years, they'll be singing my songs from—"

"Quiet, Mike!" The sharp command came from Joe, who was sitting motionless in the stern of his boat. Slowly, he raised one hand and pointed to the shore about a hundred yards ahead. "Look!" he said in a low, urgent voice. "Look what's over there."

Sandy turned and followed Joe's finger. At first, all he saw was restless motion in a grove of trees growing close by the river. Then, as he watched, the underbrush parted and a head appeared. An instant later, a huge mahogany bear was standing on the narrow strip of beach that ran along the water. Cautiously, the bear lifted up its snout and

sniffed the breeze. Apparently satisfied, the animal waddled out to the edge of the river.

"Boy!" Sandy breathed. "Think we can get in a shot?" Keeping his eyes glued on the bear, he reached around for a rifle.

"No shooting," ordered Joe. "It's against the law."

"How come?" Sandy asked in surprise.

"Can't shoot bears from a boat," Joe explained. "You have to be on dry land. Besides," he added, "that's a sow bear."

"A what?"

"A female. I bet she's got cubs with her."

Joe's guess turned out to be right. In a few moments, the big bear turned around and was pushing something out from behind one of the trees. Two little balls of fur tumbled out on the beach and began wrestling near the water. The mother bear gave them both a cuff that sent them streaking around behind her broad back.

"Never shoot a sow bear, Sandy," Joe was saying. "The cubs still need her and would die without her. Every time you shoot a female, you're killing three animals. Bears, you see, usually have two in a litter."

Sandy forgot about the rifle and turned back to

watch the family outing on the beach ahead. Suddenly, when they were about fifty yards away, the mother bear caught sight of them. With surprising speed, she snatched her cubs and tucked them between her legs. Growling fiercely, her huge snout wrinkled and her teeth bared, she backed slowly into the bushes. But just as she was about to disappear into the trees, one of the cubs broke away and scampered back out into the open. Exactly like any irate mother, the bear let out a shrill scream of warning as she jumped to cut him off. Growling and snarling, she scolded her tiny runaway and gave him a slap that sent him spinning head over heels. The little bear scrambled back to its feet and raced for the protection of the underbrush. Still scolding and snarling, the big bear followed. Sandy could hear the tirade go on for several minutes until, at last, it died down.

"Now there," Mike observed, "is a mother who doesn't believe in spoiling her child. Did you see the spanking that little cub got?"

"I sure did. I wonder if he knows why he got it."

"I think so," Joe said. "Wild animals have to learn fast. She's probably giving them both a lecture right now."

"Speaking of lectures," Mike called out to

Sandy, "when are you going to give me that lesson in bait casting?"

"Soon as we find some fish," Sandy replied. "I thought you said this river was full of trout," he said, turning to Joe.

"It is. You'll have your chance tonight after we make camp. I know a pool ahead that's a regular hangout for cutthroats."

"Cutthroats! Never heard of them."

"They've got a red slash on both sides of their lower jaw. I think this is the only part of the world where you'll find them."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Cook. "The Lewis and Clark expedition was the first to describe them. They're greedy fish and fighters."

"Hey!" Mike shouted. "Sounds good. How do they taste?"

"You *would* think of that," his father commented. "But, for your information, they're delicious."

"Great!" answered Mike. "Put me down for three or four."

"Got to catch them first."

"Sandy'll take care of that."

"How far away is that pool of yours, Joe?"

"About five miles from here we're going to run

into the worst rapids on the river. I call them Cutthroat Rapids because the trout run is just upstream."

"Are they worse than Dog Leg Falls?"

"Much worse. You can't get through them. The river drops about six feet—right on a row of razor-sharp rocks."

"Oh, oh!" cried Mike. "Sounds like another portage!"

"You're right. Feel the river picking up speed? That's Cutthroat Rapids. We'd better move over a little closer to the shore."

An hour later they were tied to the roots of a stranded drift log. Mr. Cook and Joe were busy unloading gear for the night, while Sandy and Mike inflated two small rubber rafts and checked over their fishing equipment. When Mr. Cook saw the rafts, he raised an eyebrow. "How come?" he demanded.

"I thought we could move up and down along the shore a little easier with these," Sandy explained.

"I guess you're right. But isn't it a little dangerous? We're just above Cutthroat Rapids."

"We'll be careful," Mike assured him. "Don't worry about that."

"All right," Mr. Cook agreed reluctantly. "But

wrap a length of rope around your middles. In case you start to drift, it might come in handy."

"Okay," Mike said breezily. "But now it's time for us fishermen to go to work. We're bringing back tonight's supper, you know."

"I'll go grease up the frying pan right now," Mr. Cook said, grinning at his son. "It won't take you more than ten minutes, will it?"

"Give us fifteen."

Mr. Cook laughed and went back to help Joe build the fire.

It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon by the time Sandy and Mike got down to the river with their fiberglas casting rods. Taking a position opposite some broken currents about three quarters of a mile above the roaring cataracts of Cutthroat Rapids, Sandy unhooked the catch of his reel and made ready for his first cast.

"A good caster," he told Mike, "can hit a leaf floating in the middle of a stream." He pointed to a small twig moving in their direction. "That'll be my target," he said.

Sandy placed his right foot in front of his left, almost as if he intended to walk out into the water. He held his rod in front of his body with his right hand. With an easy, swinging motion, he brought up his rod until his thumb reached eye-level. The

rod quivered back in an arc, then lunged forward. The line snaked out and soared gracefully through the air.

A moment later there was an almost imperceptible splash about three inches from the twig. Sandy kept a gentle pressure on the reel with his thumb and allowed the bait to be carried along by the river for eight or ten feet before he began to reel in.

Mike whistled in admiration. "Pretty fancy. Let's have a lesson."

"Okay," Sandy said, putting down his rod. "Now hold your thumb against the reel like this. Bring the rod up so that the tip is just about level with your eyes. That's it. Now, keep your elbow away from your body. No, no. That's too far. Just a couple of inches or so. Use your elbow as a pivot and bring the rod up. Stop it when your thumb comes up even with your eyes and then snap forward with your wrist as you come down with your arm."

Mike nodded. "All right. Let me try."

Sandy stepped back and watched as Mike concentrated on his first cast. The light rod whistled back and sprang forward. But instead of coming out in an even play, the line fluttered from the reel and flew erratically over the water.

Mike shot a glance over at Sandy. "What did I do wrong?" he demanded.

"Just about everything," Sandy said, laughing. "First of all, relax. You're snapping the rod instead of swinging it. You just need a little twist on the downstroke. In the second place, you're not using your thumb right. When the line begins to play out, make your thumb act like a brake. Here, let's try it again."

After forty minutes of Sandy's expert coaching, Mike managed several reasonably accurate casts. "Okay," Sandy said approvingly. "You're on your own. I'm going to take the raft and drift downstream a little ways."

"Watch the current," Mike warned as he set himself for another cast.

"Like a hawk," Sandy said, pushing off from shore.

But Sandy had underestimated the treacherous power of Lost River.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Perfect Cast

THE FIRST HINT that he was in trouble came when Sandy felt his raft give a trembling lurch to one side and swing sharply out into the channel. He had been casting for about fifteen minutes without success, keeping close to the protection of the rocky shore as he searched the water around him for the telltale ripple of a surfacing fish. Once or twice, when he had strayed out toward the middle of the stream in pursuit of a silvery flash, he quickly realized his danger and paddled back to safety. But now he had gone too far. He was nearly ten yards away from the near shore, moving at an ever-increasing rate of speed toward Cutthroat Rapids.

Still, he thought to himself, there was plenty of time to get back. The rapids were a good half

mile away and the river was not yet white with lashing foam.

In the end, it was a cutthroat trout that very nearly caused his death. He was a big fellow—at least eighteen inches, Sandy figured—and he chose that particular moment to break through the water with a twisting leap that nearly sent him into Sandy's lap. The sight of that magnificent fish momentarily drove all thought of danger from Sandy's head. Just one cast more, he decided, and then he would head back.

But Sandy never had a chance to make that cast. The river, in one of its unpredictable shifts, suddenly grabbed his raft and sent it skimming and twisting out into the main current. Dropping all thoughts of landing the cutthroat, Sandy leaned hastily over to pick up his paddle.

How it happened, Sandy never knew. One moment he had the paddle; the next instant he saw it shoot out of his hand and land in the water out of reach. He was helpless, caught in the grip of Lost River, minutes away from a bone-shattering fall over Cutthroat Rapids.

Fighting down the panic that threatened to overwhelm him, Sandy twisted around to call for help. Mike was standing just about where he had left him, patiently practicing his casts, unaware

of the terrible danger that had suddenly overtaken Sandy.

"Mike!" Sandy screamed, realizing, as he shouted, that nobody could help him now. "Mike!"

Mike looked up with a start. A look of surprise and horror passed over his face as he took in the situation. Sandy saw him turn and shout something to his father and Joe. Then he was running along the side of the river, his fly rod still clutched in his hand.

Cutthroat Rapids was closer now. It sent up a deep, angry roar as hundreds of tons of water thundered over its rocks. Sandy's fragile raft swayed and shook, tossed in every direction by the seething current. Clinging desperately to the slippery sides of his raft, Sandy could feel a cold spray lash at his face. Shifting his weight to ride out the bucking river, Sandy leaned to one side, then the other. Suddenly the raft leaped out of the water, gave an agonized shake and fell back on its side. The force of the fall threw Sandy from the raft and he was swept along into the remorseless current. The raging waters carried him for about fifteen feet before they slammed him, dazed and shaken, into an obstruction that clogged the river just above the rapids.

At first Sandy thought he had hit a rock. But as his groping hands clawed for a grip, he felt the sharp scratch of a branch and the rough, comforting scrape of a tree trunk.

Miraculously, the current had deposited him on the upriver side of a log jam that trembled less than twenty yards above the rapids.

Gasping for breath, Sandy shook the water out of his eyes and took a closer look at his island. He knew almost immediately that this was merely a reprieve. Already the tangle of trees groaned and shifted under the insistent tugging of the current. Here and there a few branches were tearing free, too frail to withstand the pounding pressure of the surly river.

He glanced over at the nearest shore. Only about twenty feet. He hadn't realized he was that close. The distance gave him an idea. The rope around his middle! Would it reach? Would he be able to throw it? Hardly daring to believe he had a chance, he took a tight grip on a stout branch and, with his free hand, began to unwind the line.

When he looked back at the shore, the rope dangling from one hand, he saw that Mike had arrived and was trying to wade out into the water toward him.

"No, Mike!" Sandy shouted. "You'll be carried

away!" He held his rope over his head. "I'm going to try to throw this!" he yelled.

But even as Sandy reared back to heave the line, he knew the light rope would never carry all the way to the shore. He felt the log jam shudder and move a few inches closer to the rapids. He put every ounce of his strength into the throw, but the rope didn't even reach halfway.

Sandy's mind raced over the possibilities of escape. There had to be a way out. There just had to!

"Sandy!" It was Mike calling out to him. "Get ready and watch your eyes!" Sandy saw that Mike had taken up his fly rod and was about to cast. Suddenly, as he realized what Mike had in mind, his heart gave a leap. It might work!

"Go ahead!" he shouted, ducking underneath a branch. Following the instructions Sandy had given him, Mike brought up his rod in a free and easy motion. The line hummed through the reel and floated above Sandy's head. As the lure hit the water a few feet to Sandy's left, he reached out for it blindly, ignoring the risk of a ripped finger. But the current carried it in a mocking dance, just out of reach.

Back on shore, Mike patiently reeled in his line and set himself for another try. The log jam was

breaking up now. Sandy could feel it sway and give with each push from the river. He knew there wasn't much time left.

Mike's rod snapped forward and, as Sandy watched, the glittering lure flashed through the air to settle lightly on the coarse bark of a branch six inches from his head.

Sandy felt the blood hammering in his temples as he maneuvered himself over to the hook that seemed to hang there by a thread. With a trembling hand, he reached out and snatched at the line. As his fingers closed around it, he allowed himself a gasp of relief.

"I've got it!" Sandy cried hoarsely.

"Hurry up!" came a deep voice from the shore. Sandy looked up to see Mr. Cook and Joe standing tensely beside Mike. "The jam's about to give!"

Even as he worked the end of his rope through two of the barbed hooks, Sandy heard a noise that sounded like a piece of heavy paper being ripped down the middle. A large branch—it was more like a small tree—suddenly tore away and was swept down to the rapids by the surging current.

Sandy looped the rope once around the lure and signaled to shore. "All right!" he shouted.

The line gave a tug and began to inch toward Mike. Carefully Mike reeled in, making sure that

no sudden movement would shake the rope free. It was halfway there now. Joe and Mr. Cook splashed into the water, ready to grab it as it came within range.

Sandy wanted to yell out at Mike to reel in faster, but he realized Mike knew what he was doing. He couldn't take a chance of a slip this time. There wouldn't be a third try.

With agonizing slowness, the end of the rope crawled toward shore. Another two or three feet. The log jam gave another sickening lurch, but Sandy hardly noticed it. He was watching the rope.

Suddenly it was there. Joe leaned over and grabbed the end. Mr. Cook moved in beside him and, together, they pulled.

"Come on!" Mr. Cook shouted. "We've got you!"

Sandy filled his lungs with air and kicked off from the pile of logs that had saved his life. The rope jerked once and then he was in the water, being drawn along like an enormous, awkward fish. The river fought to tear the rope out of his numbed fingers, but Sandy held on desperately. The world around him had long ago ceased to be anything but foaming water and crashing noise. There was an almost unbearable strain on his arms

as he was tossed back and forth like a prize in the deadly tug of war between life and the river.

Just as he thought he couldn't hold out another second, he felt a strong hand grip his arm. Fingers reached out and grabbed his belt, and the next moment he was being supported by Joe and Mr. Cook. Mike was standing on the shore ahead of him, his face white and shaken, his casting rod still in his hand.

"You're all right, Sandy," Mr. Cook was saying. "You're safe now."

He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat and refused to come out. Panting heavily, he was led up the beach and finally allowed to rest. As he threw himself down on the ground, a crashing noise filled the air. Sandy forced himself to look around.

The tangled hump of tree branches was rising out of the water. As Sandy watched with a dazed expression, it seemed to give a heaving sigh before settling back into the river. There was a grinding roar and suddenly the trees were gone, claimed by the howling fury of Cutthroat Rapids. A minute later, and Sandy would have gone over too.

CHAPTER NINE

Smoke on the Horizon

"CARE TO TALK ABOUT IT, Sandy?" Mr. Cook asked as he threw three or four thick slabs of bacon into a frying pan. Sandy was sitting, wrapped in a blanket, propped up next to a roaring fire, a cup of steaming instant bouillon in his hand. Joe was squatting on his heels, Indian-fashion, in front of a flat rock, mixing up a batch of johnnycake. Mike was kneeling beside Sandy, busy opening two No. 2 cans of peaches. A casual visitor would have taken it for an ordinary camping party getting ready for a relaxed evening meal. Except for Sandy's drawn face, there was no hint of their recent close brush with death.

Sandy took a deep breath and another swallow of broth before he answered. "Sure," he replied.

"But there's not much to say. I kept following the trout farther and farther out into the stream until finally I realized I was too far."

"You couldn't get back?"

Sandy shook his head in disgust. "I shouldn't really tell you this. It makes me look like such a dope. I was just about to head back for shore when suddenly this enormous trout finned out right under me. He must have been at least a foot and a half."

"Whew," whistled Joe softly. "That's the one that always gets away."

Sandy smiled wanly. "That's the one that almost got me! I went after him."

"And that brought you out still farther into the river," concluded Mr. Cook.

Sandy nodded grimly. "I felt the raft give a heave and I knew I'd better get out of there. But I was in too much of a hurry, I guess. I grabbed for the paddle and it shot out of my hand. Next thing I knew I was being carried on down to the rapids. If it hadn't been for Mike . . ." Sandy broke off and shook his head.

"You mean if it hadn't been for the way you taught me to use that fly rod!" Mike interrupted with a grin. "Boy, was I scared when I made that cast out to you! I knew it had to be just right!"

"And it was," Mr. Cook said with a smile.

"Prettiest cast I ever saw," Joe admitted. "Bet you could thread a needle with that thing."

Mike flushed and worked furiously at the second can of peaches. "Well," he said, "it worked out okay, so let's forget it."

Sandy looked at the three of them and felt a lump rise in his throat. "Listen," he said, and he noticed his voice sounded strained and husky. "I don't know how to thank you—all of you—for what you did. I guess it sounds sort of foolish to say that you saved my life, and all. But I just . . ."

Mr. Cook stood up and moved over beside Sandy. "Don't say any more, Sandy. There's no need to thank us. We were very lucky, that's all."

"But it was all my fault!" Sandy muttered, staring into the fire. "What a bonehead thing to do!"

"Sure," Mr. Cook agreed cheerfully. "You should have been more careful. But you weren't." He shrugged expressively. "Now that it's all over and done with, let's look ahead."

After a moment's silence, Sandy grinned up at him. "You're right," he said. "I've got my eye on tomorrow. What's the schedule?"

Mr. Cook turned to Joe. "How about it? You're the guide around here. Think we'll make Mormon Crossing?"

Joe walked over and put the frying pan with its johnnycake batter on the fire. "We'll be there before lunch," he predicted. He winked over at Mr. Cook and Sandy. "If we can get Sleeping Beauty there on his feet bright and early."

Mike, who always took a long time to wake up in the morning, ignored this remark. Leaning back comfortably, he began to chew thoughtfully on a blade of grass. "You know," he said, "I read a book once that said that all the great thinkers of the world like to sleep late. Brainy fellows like us," he explained, "just seem to need more rest. Besides," he reflected, "we do most of our heavy thinking at night."

"So that explains it," his father remarked.

"Explains what?"

"That noise that comes out of your sleeping bag every night."

"You thought I was snoring?" Mike seemed surprised.

"Yes," Mr. Cook admitted. "I'm afraid I did."

Mike laughed disdainfully. "If you only knew the problems I have to solve! Night after night I turn them over in my mind, searching for the right answer . . ." He paused and looked at them seriously. "I tell you, those problems are heavy. When I turn them over they make a big racket.

That must be what you keep hearing, Dad," he confided.

"Oh, oh!" Joe grinned. "Better stuff some cotton in your ears tonight," he said.

"How come?" Sandy asked.

"Mike's going to have a real problem to solve. How to portage around Cutthroat Rapids without doing any work."

"Another portage," groaned Mike.

"I wouldn't advise trying to go through them," Sandy remarked with a smile.

Mike grinned back at him. "Right!" he nodded. "There speaks a man of experience. Joe," he said, suddenly changing the subject, "you ever been in the mountains above Mormon Crossing?"

"Sure, a couple of times."

"What sort of country is it?"

"A lot wilder than what we've gone through. In places it gets above the timber line."

"Good hunting?"

"The best. I can show you a rock bluff where you'll see mountain goats every morning."

"What about mountain lions?" Sandy asked eagerly.

"You'll get your cougar, Sandy," Joe said. "Don't worry. The Lost River Range is full of game. A regular hunter's paradise." He shook the

frying pan and tested the johnnycake with a fork. "You know," he said meditatively, rocking back on his heels, "next to a little spot in Montana I've got my eye on, I love this country best. It's unspoiled," he explained. "It's exactly the way it was when men like Jim Bridger and John Colter first saw it nearly a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Who were they?" Sandy wanted to know.

"Trappers. Guides, like myself. John Colter guided Lewis and Clark. He traded with my people, the Blackfeet, and was the first white man ever to see Yellowstone National Park. The Indians told him about it and he went to have a look for himself. When he got back to his trading station, nobody would believe him. A whole valley where the smoke comes right out of the ground! They laughed in his face!"

"What finally happened to Colter?" Mike asked.

"He died, still sticking to his story. He was only about thirty-eight or so. It was a hard country."

"It still is," Mr. Cook said.

"Yes," Joe agreed. "But that's what I like about it. Some day," he said softly, staring out at the setting sun in the west, "I'm going to settle into that ranch in Montana and spend the rest of my life living with it. Right in the back yard of the wilderness. I hope I never see another city."

"When will that be?" Sandy asked.

Joe laughed. "When I can save up enough money to buy it," he replied.

"What happens if it gets crowded?" Mike asked. "Full of tourists like us?"

"Not much chance!" Joe said. "Look at us. I bet we're the first people to come through here in months."

"Well, we're not alone," Mike observed, pointing off toward the river. "The joint's filling up."

The three of them swiveled around and followed Mike's outstretched finger. In the distance, behind a range of hills, in the direction from which they had come, a lazy plume of smoke curled slowly above the treetops.

Joe gave a cry of surprise and jumped to his feet. He stood watching the smoke, every muscle in his body tense, his hands balled tight into hard fists at his side. Sandy saw he was breathing in shallow, panting gasps, like a runner after a long race.

Mr. Cook saw it too. He and Sandy exchanged glances. "What's the matter, Joe?" he asked. "You seem upset."

Joe turned with a start. "What . . . upset?" he stammered. "No," he said, forcing a thin smile. "I just didn't expect anybody else to be out here."

"They seem to be following us downriver," Mike observed.

"Pity we won't be able to meet them," Mr. Cook remarked. "But we'll be leaving the river at Mormon Crossing."

As they were talking, the smoke suddenly stopped. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of water on the campfire. "That's odd," Mr. Cook muttered. "I wonder why they did that? You don't normally build a fire and then douse it right away."

"No, you don't," Joe said grimly. He looked even more disturbed than he had the day of his accident on the Henderson dock. It was especially strange since Joe had been in excellent spirits all through the trip downriver.

There was an awkward pause that was broken by Mr. Cook bending over their cookfire. "No sense in wondering about something that must be fifteen or twenty miles away," he declared. "Let's eat."

Dinner was a silent, thoughtful affair. As soon as the dishes were scraped and cleaned in the river, Mr. Cook announced he was going to turn in. "We'll be up by dawn tomorrow," he said. "So I advise you boys to do the same."

Mike yawned and said he thought it was a good

idea. Fifteen minutes later, the camp was quiet. But Sandy, who was stretched out near the fire, found he couldn't sleep. The excitement of his narrow escape from the rapids was still with him. And now, added to that, here was Joe's odd behavior to worry about.

Restlessly he tossed and turned, dead-tired, but still awake. Finally—it must have been nearly nine o'clock because he saw the moon was beginning to rise—he opened his eyes with an angry shake.

Their clearing was in almost total darkness. The only light came from the few embers that still glowed in the ashes. Suddenly Sandy became aware of a figure on the other side of the fire. In the faint light Sandy could just make out a face. It was Joe.

He was sitting with his arms crossed over his drawn-up knees, staring into the red coals. His eyes were clouded with worry and there was a heavy, brooding look about his mouth.

Sandy wondered whether to speak, but decided against it. Joe, he knew from experience, was not a man who would willingly talk about his troubles. All at once Sandy realized he was sleepy. He made up his mind to forget about the mystery that surrounded Joe. He would think about the cougar

hunt tomorrow. And if he was very lucky, he would forget about his experience in Cutthroat Rapids forever.

He finally fell into a fitful sleep that was streaked and shattered by nightmares. Three huge black crows were chasing Joe, and he was trying to help. As they ran together, they came to a quiet stream. But as they started to cross, the stream became a roaring river and the three crows turned into giant cutthroat trout. Sandy could see the red slashes on either side of their lower jaws as they strained to catch him in their razor-sharp teeth. Twisting himself around in a desperate attempt to escape, he swam faster through the boiling current.

Suddenly he was awake, drenched with sweat and shaking like a reed. The panic left him as soon as he knew where he was. Before he settled himself back into his sleeping bag, he looked over at the fire.

Joe was still there, the troubled look still on his face. After a moment, Sandy slept deeply.

CHAPTER TEN

Lion Country

"LISTEN!" Hank Dawson threw up one hand as he reined in his horse. Behind him the column of riders plowed to a sudden halt. "Hear that?" he called. Down from the mountain above them, through the lonely, windswept stands of ponderosa and jackpine, drifted a yelping chorus of excited barks.

"Dogs!" Sandy cried. "We must be nearly there."

Hank nodded. "About twenty minutes," he said. "Hear that deep-voiced bark? That's Drum —the leader. Best lion dog I ever had." He turned in his saddle and called back to the others. "Not far to go now. Think you can hold out?"

They had been riding steadily since mid-morn-

ing, shortly after they arrived at Mormon Crossing. Hank Dawson was waiting for them, as Mr. Cook had predicted, with four pack mules and five saddle horses, ready and eager to start the upland trek without delay.

Hank Dawson turned out to be a huge, raw-boned man who looked, unexpectedly, as if he had just stepped down from the deck of a Viking ship. His thick blond hair and reddish-gold beard were both worn long—because, as he explained, he couldn't find his scissors and he never bothered to take a razor with him into the mountains.

Standing side by side, Joe and Hank Dawson made an odd contrast. Both men had the same air of rugged power and quiet competence. But while Joe's strength was that of solid rock—planted firmly and unyieldingly in the ground—Hank's was that of a sturdy tree that towered high in the clear mountain air.

It was a subdued party that had pulled up to Mormon Crossing to meet Hank that morning. Joe, although he had regained some of his composure after seeing the smoke from the mysterious campfire the night before, was still thoughtful and quiet. As for Sandy, the experience above Cutthroat Rapids was too fresh a memory for him to be his normal, cheerful self.

But hard work quickly brightened the mood. The boats had to be beached, turned upside down and covered with canvas tarpaulins. Trip boxes and camping gear had to be unloaded, sorted, repacked and arranged evenly on the backs of the sturdy, patient pack mules—bandy-legged little animals that seemed to be willing to carry an incredible amount of baggage without complaint.

Hank Dawson directed the entire operation with practiced efficiency. He gave Sandy and Mike the job of weeding out excess equipment and storing it away.

"That includes all your fishing tackle," he told them. "You won't be needing that in the mountains. And the heavy camping stuff—like tents and sleeping bags and cooking gear."

"All the comforts of home," Mike observed ruefully.

"That's it," Hank agreed. "Tents are too bulky. One frying pan apiece is plenty, and a couple of blankets is all you'll need for a bedroll."

"What about an air mattress?" Mike suggested hopefully.

Hank brushed the idea aside. "That's the trouble with most campers. They go out on the trail with so much fancy equipment that they don't have time to enjoy what they came for. Why,

I remember a party I guided once—he came up here to get himself a mountain sheep." Hank shook his head in wonder. "That man was a walking sporting-goods store. Took three mules for his equipment alone. It used to take us two hours in the morning just to break camp. I tried to tell him right after dawn was the best time to bag a sheep, but he wouldn't listen."

"Did he ever get one?" Sandy asked.

Hank smiled. "Sure," he said. "I've got my reputation to think of. I got up one morning while he was still in the sack and found me a real nice ram. After I shot him, I propped him up against some rocks and went back down to camp. 'I think we'll find ourselves a sheep today,' I told him. 'There's a set of tracks near here that looks promising.' " Hank chuckled and fished in his pocket for some cigarette makings. "Course, what he didn't know," he went on, as he expertly rolled himself a smoke, "was that no man alive ever saw tracks over solid rock. Anyway, he thought I could and that was the important thing. I led him around for about an hour and finally brought him to where he could see the ram I'd planted. 'Go ahead,' I told him. 'Shoot before he gets away.' Well, he rears up his rifle and lets that sheep have it. The force of his bullet knocks the sheep over

just like I knew it would. I skinned it real quick so's he wouldn't notice the second bullet hole and then gave him the head to have mounted. He was the happiest man I ever saw. Guess he's still bragging about that shot."

"Do all guides have that kind of trouble?" Mr. Cook asked.

Hank shrugged. "It's bound to happen in this business. Ask Joe. He knows."

The Indian nodded gravely. "I've been at it for nearly five years and you're about the best party I've ever taken out."

"Gee!" Mike laughed. "Can you imagine what some of the others must have been like! We're certainly not a prize bunch."

"Yes, you are," Joe insisted. "At least you let me do my job. The arguments some people give me!"

"That's it," Hank cut in. "That's exactly the trouble. People hire a guide to tell them what to do—and then refuse to do it."

"Or else they want a long explanation," Joe added. "Which you can't give because there isn't time."

"Speaking of time," Hank said, reaching into the bottom of one of the boats to pull out a trip box. "We've got to get moving if we want to make

my place before nightfall. Start sorting that gear, boys."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Mike said smartly. "No questions asked."

Hank grunted approvingly as he brought the box up to his shoulder. "Good. We'll get along fine."

After about an hour's work, the boats were beached and secured under canvas covers, the mules were loaded and they were ready to mount. "I'll take the lead," Hank announced. "Sandy, you follow behind me. Then you and your father, Mike. Do you think you can handle those mules by yourself, Joe?" The Indian nodded. "Good. One final word of advice. We'll be going up nearly four thousand feet. The trails are hard to follow and sometimes they'll look dangerous. But these animals have made the trip before. So don't try to guide them. Just give them their head and they'll get you up safe and sound." He looked around inquiringly. "All set? Then let's go."

It seemed to Sandy that the trail led straight up, through narrow box canyons and over barren stretches of rock fall where every step sent a shower of loose stones cascading down the steep slope. Most of the time he concentrated grimly on keep-

ing his balance and breathed a prayer that the wiry little pony underneath him knew what it was doing. Occasionally, though, Hank would lead them across a relatively flat plateau and let them stop to admire the view.

They were standing on one of these ridges—the silvery ribbon of Lost River far below them and a towering panorama of snow-capped peaks all around them—when Mike sighed deeply.

"What a perfect place," he said, "for a picnic."

"A what?" his father asked.

"Eats," Mike explained. "Big thick roast beef sandwiches and a thermos bottle full of cold milk."

"You wouldn't be hungry, would you?" Mr. Cook said with a smile.

"Oh no," Mike assured him. "I'm not hungry, exactly. I'm just plain starved. I'm so lightheaded from not having any food that I can't stay on the back of my horse. I keep floating away."

"I'm afraid we can't stop to cook a meal," Hank told Mike. "These mountains are no fun in the dark."

"The death sentence," Mike muttered gloomily. "I'll never make it."

"Oh yes, you will," Joe called out. "Indians used to travel for days with nothing more than a handful of dried corn. If they did it, so can you."

"I'm a little out of practice," Mike pointed out. "Besides, I don't have any corn."

"But, Mike," Hank said, "there's food all around you."

"I know," Mike replied gloomily. "I see it everywhere I look. Cold fried chicken, hot buttered rolls, strawberry shortcake . . ."

"No, I mean it," Hank interrupted. "A man could live for days on the food that grows in the mountains." He swung down from his horse and walked over to a whitebark pine. "See these cones?" He reached up, twisted one from a branch, and broke it open. A dozen tiny reddish-orange pellets spilled out into his hand. "These are pine nuts," he explained, holding one up for Mike to take. "They're like the piñon nuts that grow in the Southwest."

Mike took an experimental bite. "They're delicious," he announced.

"Help yourself. Plenty more where that came from." Hank walked over to a clump of grass that was laced with delicate-looking flowers. "Here's something else," he called, bending down to pull up the blossoms. Up through the earth came white roots that resembled onions. "Camass bulbs," he said. "You boil them in water and they taste like potatoes. They saved the Lewis and Clark expedi-

tion more than once. If we looked hard enough, I imagine we could find some puffball mushrooms."

"What are they?" Sandy demanded.

"Just like regular mushrooms," Hank explained, "but much bigger. Some of them grow to be the size of a basketball. Two of them will feed a dozen men. In the fall," he went on, "these mountains are covered with golden currants. Wild grapes ripen later in the summer. What more could you ask for?"

"Nothing," said Mike, munching happily. "Except maybe some more of these nuts."

"Tear some loose and let's get going," Hank ordered. "It must be nearly three o'clock by now."

For three more hours they plodded ahead, with Hank setting a steady, tireless pace. The only sound that broke the mountain stillness was the creak of saddle leather and the sharp, scraping noise made by the horses as they carefully picked their way up the rocky trail.

The sun was just beginning to turn a deep orange at their backs when Hank finally called the weary riders to a halt and pointed out the faint, echoing chorus of dogs in the distance.

"How do they know we're coming?" Sandy wondered. "Can they hear us so far away?"

"They've caught our scent," Hank explained. "They have a very keen sense of smell."

"How many dogs do you have?" Mike asked.

"About twenty. Real scrappers, every one."

"I guess they have to be," Sandy said, "to tangle with mountain lions."

"Say!" Mike said. "That's right. We're in mountain-lion country now." He turned in his saddle and peered up at the bluffs of raw rock above him.

Hank nodded. "Yep," he said. "They're thick as fleas around here. You'll be close enough to shake hands with one before the week's out."

Hank's prediction, it turned out later, was almost too close for comfort.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hunting Talk

HANK DAWSON'S HUNTING LODGE, high in the Lost River Mountains of Idaho, was the first house Sandy had ever been in where no woman had ever set foot. In every way it was a man's paradise—designed exclusively for male society.

No chintz curtains cluttered the view. There were no pictures, prints or china figurines on side tables, no hooked rugs underfoot, no attempt to cover wooden walls with plaster or, even worse, with decorative wallpaper. Hank Dawson had built himself a straightforward, sturdy house. Massive, seasoned beams supported the roof. Half-rounded logs formed the walls and the floor. All wood surfaces were scraped, sanded and still fresh with the fragrant smell of the forest.

An enormous forty-foot main room looked out on a breath-taking view of jutting peaks and misty valleys. Behind the lodge bulged a huge rock bluff, dotted with clusters of vivid green jackpine and traced by a thin finger of crystal-clear water that trickled musically down its rough, gray surface.

One end of the living room was completely faced with a stone wall that held the biggest fireplace Sandy had ever seen. Splendid heads of elk, mule deer, mountain goats and pronghorn antelope filled up the rest of the space. One animal, though, was significantly missing. Mike was the first to notice it.

"How come no mountain lions, Hank?" he asked.

They were stretched out in front of the fireplace, deep in comfortable chairs, relaxing as the stiffness of a hard day in the saddle drained slowly out of their tired bodies. A full meal and the warm glow of the fire had made them all pleasantly drowsy.

Mr. Cook and Hank Dawson were both drawing thoughtfully on their pipes. Joe sat with his head thrown back against the stone wall, the smoke from his cigarette curling lazily through his fingers. Mike was propped up on one elbow, staring into the fire with glazed fascination. Sandy was

lying on a large, overstuffed sofa, one hand absent-mindedly scratching the floppy ear of a big-chested tan-and-black dog.

The dog, Drum—Hank's favorite lion hound—had adopted Sandy the first moment they met. Ignoring everyone else, even Hank, he insisted on padding around after him all evening and was now settled happily by his side.

Mike's question broke a contented, peaceful silence that had lasted for nearly ten minutes.

"What's that, Mike?" Hank said.

Mike repeated his question. "I see every other kind of trophy up there, but no lion," he added.

Hank tapped the bowl of his pipe reflectively against the side of the fireplace. "Frankly," he said, "I don't think they're worth mounting."

Mike looked surprised. "I thought they were the best prize of all."

Hank shook his head. "I don't agree. Oh, they're dangerous, all right. Don't make any mistake about that."

"How big do they get?" Sandy asked.

"They vary," Hank replied. "Mountain lions or pumas or cougars—they're the same animal, you know—are found all the way from British Columbia down to the tip of South America. And the farther north you go, the bigger they get. A

full-grown male will weigh as much as two hundred pounds. That makes them bigger than an African leopard."

"Then why don't you like to hunt them?" Mike asked.

"That's just it. I don't hunt them."

"Huh?" Mike was confused.

"I kill them. There's a big difference." Hank shrugged and reached for a match. "At least there is for me."

Sandy slid along the bottom of the sofa and sat up. "I don't get it" he said.

"Well," Hank said deliberately through a cloud of smoke, "look at it this way. If you had a vegetable garden and a woodchuck was tearing it apart, what would you do?"

"Shoot him," Mike replied promptly.

"You see?" Hank grinned. "I notice you didn't use the word 'hunt.' That's exactly the way I feel about a cougar. They're destructive beasts and wanton killers. I've known them to kill fifty sheep in a night just for the fun of it. That's why I've declared war on them." He paused and looked up at the trophy heads lined up along the wall. "There's another reason I don't care much for mountain lions. They're no challenge to me as a hunter. It's no good trying to match wits with

them because, essentially, they're cowards. All you do is set the dogs on their trail and they do the rest. You just follow the pack and, after a little while, you come up against your lion crouched in a tree like a frightened old lady. After that, it doesn't take much to knock it off."

"Couldn't they kill the dogs?" Sandy asked.

"Oh, yes," Hank said. "And they do. Old Drum's been clawed plenty of times, but, knock on wood, he's still alive and kicking. A cornered animal is always dangerous. I've had them charge me on several occasions. If they're hungry enough they'll come right up to a house. One of them tried to get into my corral once. I shot him just outside, on the path as you come up to the front door."

Mike shook his head in bewilderment. "I give up," he said. "It sure sounds like exciting sport to me. I wouldn't exactly put it in the same class as shooting woodchucks."

Mr. Cook spoke for the first time. "I think I know what Hank means. He's the man with the gun. He's got the advantage. The sport isn't in the killing—it's in the stalking."

"Right!" Hank agreed, leaning back comfortably. "I remember one time I was hunting elk up in Thoroughfare Creek country in Wyoming. On the first day, I spotted a real giant—oh, he was a

beauty! He must have had close to twenty points and a spread of nearly seventy inches. How I wanted that head! Nothing else would do. I stalked that animal for ten days trying to get into position for a shot. But he was a wise customer and always managed to keep out of my way. Not that he got panicky or ran!" Hank broke into a grin of admiration. "That's the whole point. He knew what I was after—I'm convinced of that—but he wouldn't give me the satisfaction of showing any fear. He was that proud. Well, as I say, we played our little game for ten days and, finally, on the morning of the eleventh, just as dawn was beginning to break through some gray clouds, I stepped out into a clearing in the woods. I heard a noise behind me and there was my elk. He was standing straight as an arrow, staring at me—a perfect shot against the rising sun." Hank threw up his hands. "But I couldn't do it. We stood looking at each other for about a minute or two and then he slowly moved back into the woods—one of the most majestic sights I've ever seen." Hank found a twig and began to scrape the bowl of his pipe. "I've never regretted losing that elk." Hank paused and corrected himself. "Actually, I didn't lose him. He was mine—in a way that no stuffed trophy will ever be."

Mr. Cook looked over at his son and Sandy. "You boys still want to bother with a cougar?"

Hank threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, come now, Arthur. Don't discourage them. Of course they do and I don't blame them. I just hope they'll experience some real hunting, too."

Mike, who had been listening to Hank's story with a rapt expression on his face, scrambled to his feet. The quick movement made Drum open one curious eye. "Why don't we start tomorrow?" Mike cried excitedly.

"Tomorrow?" his father said with a frown. "I'd just as soon wait a day or two."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, we're up pretty high, you know. Before I go scrambling around any mountain peaks, I'd like to get used to the altitude."

"I'll go out with the boys," Hank said unexpectedly. "You can loaf around the house and take it easy."

"How about it, Dad?"

Mr. Cook shrugged and put down his pipe. "As far as I'm concerned there's no better man in the world to take you hunting than Hank. You're sure you want to, Hank?"

"Positive."

"Then that's settled." Mr. Cook nodded over to

the Indian, who was sitting with his back against the stone wall. "How about you, Joe? Feel like going out?"

Joe smiled and shook his head slowly. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "I'll just wander around here for a while until I get my mountain legs under me."

"Suit yourself," Hank Dawson replied. "What's your pleasure, gents?" he said, turning back to the boys.

"How do you mean?" Sandy asked.

"What do you want to go out after—giraffes, elephants, saber-toothed tigers—you name it!"

"You're the boss," Mike said, grinning. "You say!"

Hank paused and considered the question. "Well," he said slowly, "how about trying for an *Oreamnos montanus?*"

"A *what?*"

"A mountain goat to you, Mike."

"A mountain goat!" Mike's face fell. "I thought we were going to go after some big game—not a billy goat!"

Hank laughed. "Don't kid yourself—if you'll pardon the pun. A mountain goat is my personal candidate for the most dangerous animal in the world."

"No fooling!"

"I'm serious. A mountain goat lives in the most inaccessible places. He's got eyes like binoculars, he's smart and fast, and he's not afraid of anything that walks. I've known of cases where mountain goats have killed a lion. He may not be much to look at, but I can promise you an exciting chase and one you won't forget in a hurry. Okay?"

Sandy and Mike both nodded their heads in agreement. "Okay," they chorused.

"Good." Hank stood up and stretched his arms over his head. "I'm for bed," he announced. "And you better do the same. If we're going hunting tomorrow, we'll have to be up at . . ."

"Oh, no!" Mike groaned as he lumbered to his feet. "Don't tell me—dawn again! Why is it," he asked plaintively, "that everything around here starts at dawn?"

"Tell you what," Hank said, moving to the door of one of the bedrooms that opened off from the main room. "When we get back, we'll let you lie around in bed some morning all you like."

"Sure," Sandy agreed. "We'll let you sleep till six—or maybe even seven."

"Lucky boy." Mr. Cook chuckled as he reached over to turn down the wick of the kerosene lamp. "Just let me know what the sunrise is like to-

morrow morning, will you? Personally, I plan to sleep until noon."

"Still want that goat?" Hank asked Mike, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Mike grinned back at him. "See you at dawn," he said. "If I'm lucky, I may even have one eye open."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rockslide

THE URGENT JANGLING of the alarm clock woke Sandy first. The room was icy cold and pitch-black, but the soft glow of the dial read four-thirty. Sandy forced himself to grope free of the blanket and shut off the insistent clamor. He leaned over and gave Mike's shoulder a shake.

"Hey, Mike!" he called.

Mike groaned, opened one eye, and then turned back to the wall, muttering something under his breath.

Sandy shook him a second time. "Wake up, Mike. Let's go."

The figure under the blanket heaved up and settled back down on the mattress. "Whazzamatta-whyuh, huh?" it said.

Sandy sighed and swung his feet down on the cold floor. "A brilliant conversationalist," he observed, reaching for his trousers. "May I quote you on that?" A bulge under the blanket made a tempting target. He gave it a friendly whack. "Rise and shine, boy. We've got a date with a goat."

There was a sharp yelp and a flurry of movement. Slowly a tousled head appeared from under the covers and regarded Sandy with a baleful look. "No self-respecting goat is up at a time like this," he said bitterly. "So let me go back to sleep. What time is it, anyway?"

"After four-thirty. I'm going to go out and see about breakfast. See you in the kitchen."

Mike reached for the covers. "Good," he grunted. "That gives me another fifteen minutes."

Sandy stood over Mike's bed threateningly. "You want the cold-water treatment?" he said.

"You win." Mike struggled up and peered out at the morning. "Looks like the middle of the night," he said.

"The sun'll be up pretty soon. I'll throw on some bacon and eggs while you get dressed."

"Lots of eggs!" Mike shouted as Sandy opened the door and went out into the main room.

Hank was already up. A fire was going in the

fireplace and Sandy could hear noises coming from the kitchen. He pushed open the door to find Hank mopping up a plate of eggs. He was dressed in a heavy flannel shirt, a pair of corduroy trousers and high-topped, sturdy-looking climbing shoes. A leather jacket, a bedroll and a rifle were propped against the far wall.

"I put out some bacon and eggs for you two," he said when he saw Sandy. "Got your gear all packed?"

"We're all ready. We did it last night." He threw half a dozen thick slabs of bacon into the frying pan and sat down beside Hank. "Doesn't look as if it's going to be much of a day," he said.

" 'Fraid not. We're due for some rain." Hank got up and scraped his plate. "Hurry up with your breakfast and meet me outside. I'd like to be up in the peaks by dawn."

Later that morning, they stood on a narrow, windswept ledge of rock, nearly ten thousand feet high, watching a pale, watery dawn touch the tops of mountain peaks fifty miles away. It was an experience Sandy would never forget. One moment they were in darkness; then gradually the world around them began to take shape. First the tops of the ridges loomed up out of the gray mist. As the

sun rose higher, faint fingers of light streaked down into the valleys far below, probing the shadowy pools of night that still huddled there.

Sandy and Mike stared at the scene wordlessly, lost in the wonder of the view. Finally Mike sighed deeply. "It must have looked like this a million years ago," he said softly.

Sandy nodded. "Not a living thing in sight. Just the mountains and the wind . . ."

"And the rain," Hank said suddenly. "Here it comes."

The first spattering gusts of rain lashed the rock outcropping above them. In the east, dirty ragged clouds scudded over the sun. "Want to go back?" Hank asked.

Sandy and Mike both shook their heads. "Not unless the rain drives the goats away," Sandy said.

"Don't worry about that," Hank replied. "I told you they're tough. Weather like this won't stop a goat." He dropped the pack from his shoulder and reached into a pocket for a pair of binoculars. "Here," he said, offering the glasses to Sandy. "Start looking."

Sandy brought the binoculars up to his eyes and started to scan the neighboring peaks. "Where do I look?" he asked.

"Notice how the south sides of all the peaks are

covered with trees?" Hank asked. Sandy nodded. "That's because they get most of the sun."

"The sides facing north are practically all rock," Sandy observed.

"Except for a big yellow pine here and there. See them?"

"Sure. And there seems to be something that looks like snow at the base of each tree."

"Right."

"Snow!" Mike said. "At the end of June?"

"It never had a chance to melt," Hank explained. "The shade of the tree keeps the ground cold until the middle of July. Now take a close look at every patch of snow you can see. That's where you'll spot a goat."

Sandy swept back and forth across the peaks with his glasses. "Not a thing," he announced.

"Let me look." After a moment or two, Hank stiffened and leaned forward. "There's your billy goat," he said.

"Where?" Sandy cried. "I just looked there."

"Well, you didn't look hard enough." He turned the glasses back to Sandy. "Try another peek."

Sandy focused in on a tiny white spot that stood out against the gray granite. At first he thought it

was a faint smear of snow. But then, unexpectedly, he saw it move. "I'll be darned!" he breathed. "You're right!"

"Let me take a look!" Mike cried. He stared through the binoculars and nodded his head excitedly. "I see him," he cried. "How do you know it's a billy?"

"I don't think it's a nanny goat," Hank said. "This one's all by himself and nannies mostly stay together."

"Just like women!" Mike observed with a laugh.

"That's right." Hank grinned. "I guess they like to gossip. And then you'll usually see some kids around if it's a nanny."

"Anything else?" Sandy asked.

"One more thing. Nannies are snow-white, but billies get dirty. From the color, I'll bet that goat's a billy."

"Okay," Mike said. "Now how do we get him?"

They were separated from their quarry by a deep box canyon whose sides plunged almost straight down from the narrow ledge at their feet. To reach the goat, they would have to work their way down the sheer rock wall, cross over a small stream that flowed along the canyon floor and then climb up the far side.

But instead of heading directly into the canyon, Hank Dawson led them along the narrow ledge, around to the other side of the mountain.

"We can't climb right up under his nose," he explained. "He'd spot us for sure. We're going to have to get behind and above him."

"Is there a trail up there?" Mike asked.

"I doubt it. You all set for a rough ride?"

The boys tightened their pack straps and nodded.

"Then let's go. We'll have to move fast. He's not going to stay up there all morning."

Hank set a fast, sure-footed pace over a ledge that curled around the peak like a vine. Sandy and Mike followed as best they could, concentrating on keeping their balance as they worked their way over rain-slippery rock, inches away from about 700 feet of space that yawned emptily to their left.

As they came puffing around the first turn, Hank was waiting for them, a tree branch in either hand.

"We're in luck," he said, pointing down. "A rockslide."

Sandy peered over the edge. Hundreds of small pieces of rock had spilled down the side of the

mountain, forming a steep pathway to the floor of the canyon below.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Mike asked. "Won't the whole thing give way?"

"It'll slide, if that's what you mean," Hank replied. "But it won't all come tumbling down at once. It's sort of like running down a long sand dune. The particles of sand keep slipping downhill, but the hill itself holds together. Use these branches for balance and you'll get down without any trouble. Here, watch me."

With a carefree abandon that made the boys gasp, Hank flung himself down on the river of rock. The force of his leap made the slide slip forward about six feet. Rocks about the size of a man's fist clattered and grated downhill in a sagging wave with Hank riding on the crest. When it stopped, he plunged his branch down and leaned on it to catch his balance. Lifting one leg free, he used his makeshift alpenstock like a pole vault to propel himself forward a second time.

"Look at him go!" Mike said admiringly.

"We'd better get going ourselves," Sandy said. "Or he'll be halfway up the other side."

"What we need for this maneuver," Mike said as he braced himself for a take-off, "is a little armor

for the seat of our pants. I have the feeling we're going to need it."

Sandy grinned at him, took a deep breath and jumped. His feet ground into a bed of pebbles and suddenly he was sliding downhill. Clawing wildly to keep upright, he felt the rocks brake to a halt. Before he fell he managed to catch himself and push off for another short spurt.

Their progress was remarkably fast. They made the 700-foot descent in a matter of minutes, arriving at the bottom shaken, bruised, but triumphant.

"Good for you," Hank said as they came hurtling down to join him. "You made that like experts. It's a little like skiing, isn't it?"

Mike managed a lopsided grin as he shook out a pocketful of pebbles. "Think we'll make the Olympics?" he asked.

"Not this year, Mike," Hank answered.

"Good," grunted Mike. "I can wait. Where to now?"

"We'll follow the canyon down to the other side of the peak and go up there."

The south face of the peak was covered with scrubby pine that somehow managed to grow despite a fifty-degree slope. Burdened by their rifles and full packs, they began to haul themselves

up, using tree trunks, rock outcroppings and anything else that came to hand. Slowly they inched along, scraping on their stomachs through soaking wet, sharp pine needles that cut their faces and dripped water down the backs of their necks.

"Brother!" Mike muttered. "This is work!"

"We can always go back if you don't think it's worth it," Hank called back. He was almost fifty yards ahead of them, moving through the tangled underbrush with comparative ease.

"Wouldn't dream of it!" Mike replied. "I just wish I could get one hand free. I've got a terrible itch on my right shoulder blade."

"You would think of that at a time like this!" Sandy said.

"Just keep moving, please," Mike said. "That's a beautiful boot you've got on, but not in my face."

"Hey, boys!" It was Hank calling from up ahead.

"What?" Sandy said.

"I'm going on and spot the goat," he said. "I want some time to figure out the best stalk for the shot. It's a little clearer up ahead, so you won't have too much trouble. Just keep coming as fast as you can and I'll meet you at the top."

"Okay," Sandy yelled. "We'll see you up there."

"You're sure you can find the way?"

"Positive," Sandy assured him.

Hank waved a hand and scrambled out of sight. Behind him, Sandy heard Mike mutter, "We're a fine pair of hunters! Here we are—stuck on the side of a mountain in the middle of a cloudburst like a couple of flies caught on flypaper."

"Well, at least we can move," Sandy said philosophically, shaking the water out of his eyes. "Looks like another seventy-five yards or so. Think you can make it?"

"Carry on, old man."

After another five minutes of hard climbing, they broke through to a clearing that led in one direction to another clump of trees. In the other direction was another rock slide, similar to the one they had just negotiated, but smaller.

"Which way?" Mike wondered.

"Hank said it was easy going from here on," Sandy reasoned. "He must mean up the slide."

"He certainly can't mean through those trees," Mike agreed. "Let's try it your way."

Moving along on all fours, Sandy started to scramble up the slippery rock. He was surprised to find the going was much easier than he had anticipated.

"Hey!" he said. "This is a cinch."

"A real pleasure," Mike echoed.

They were halfway up when, abruptly, the rock slide gave an ominous lurch. Both boys froze as they felt the tremor and heard a grinding rumble beneath their feet.

"I don't think I like this!" Mike's voice sounded shaky.

"Me either," Sandy said. "Let's go back—quick!"

"Right!"

Sandy could hear Mike backtracking down the slide. There was a clatter of loose rolling stones, a second, more violent tremor, and then a sharp cry.

"Sandy!" Mike shouted. "It's giving way! I'm falling!"

Forgetting his own balance, Sandy whirled around and grabbed for Mike's arm. Below him the entire slide was slowly caving in. Sandy's fingers tightened around Mike's wrist but he could offer no support.

Suddenly, the sliding surface gave way with a rush, and he was plunged with sickening force through a roaring avalanche of grinding rock.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Hidden Cave

NEITHER BOY CRIED OUT. The accident had happened so suddenly there wasn't time. Sandy started to protect his head from flying hunks of granite, but before he could lift his arms, he felt his body break through the curtain of tumbling rock. The next instant his feet hit solid ground and he was thrown over on his side.

For a moment Sandy lay in semi-darkness, dazed by his fall. The thundering roar of the avalanche was passing somewhere over his head. Then he remembered Mike. "Mike—you all right?" he called, almost afraid to ask the question.

It seemed hours before he heard an answering gasp. "Yes. Wind knocked out . . . me."

Sandy pulled himself over beside Mike. A swirling cloud of dust cut down visibility to a few inches. Just as he reached over to touch Mike's arm, there was a sigh and Mike struggled to sit up. "I'm okay now, thanks," he said. "I just couldn't catch my breath." He looked around wonderingly. "What happened?"

They were sitting in what looked like the entrance to a large cave that sloped back down into the mountain at a steep slant. A jagged pile of loose stones nearly—but not quite—blocked the mouth.

"How did we get here?" Mike asked in an awed voice. The dust had settled and they were sitting in a tomblike silence. Occasionally a single stone clattered noisily down the slope outside.

"I'll tell you in a minute." Sandy crawled over the rocks and stuck his head out through the opening.

"What do you see?" Mike called.

"We got caught in an avalanche, all right," Sandy said. "Half the mountain seems to be down there below us."

"I still don't see how we ended up in here."

"There's only one explanation," Sandy said as he scrambled back to join Mike. "The slide was

covering the mouth of this cave. When the rocks started to give way, the entrance suddenly opened up and we fell in."

"And all that stuff passed right over our heads," Mike said.

"Looks like that's it."

The two boys stared at each other in silence. "You know," Sandy said quietly, "we're a couple of pretty lucky guys."

"I'll say! If we had been any other place when the slide started to go . . ."

"We'd be down there at the bottom under a few hundred tons of rock," Sandy finished.

"Let's not talk about it." Mike shivered.

"All right," Sandy agreed. "Let's talk about how we're going to get out of here."

Mike's brows knit together in a frown. "Do you think Hank knows what happened?"

Sandy laughed. "One thing's for sure," he said. "He certainly heard us. That was a pretty big racket we set off."

"Yeah," Mike agreed. "But I wonder if he knows where we are?"

"I don't see how he can," Sandy replied. "Do you feel good enough to crawl up to the entrance?"

"Oh, sure," Mike said. "I'm fine."

Together they scrambled over the loose rubble that had collected at the mouth of the cave. "Let's take it easy," Sandy said, picking his way with care. "We don't want to start another one."

Mike flashed Sandy a grin over his shoulder. "Why not?" he demanded. "Now that we've done it once, the next time should be easier."

"Do me a favor and practice it when I'm not around," Sandy said with a chuckle. He pulled himself up to the lip of the cave and leaned over. "Nobody in sight," he announced.

"Do you think it's safe to go down?"

"I don't know," Sandy said. "I wish we could see Hank."

"I've got an idea," Mike declared. "We've got our rifles. Why don't we fire off a couple of shots?"

"Hey, that's using your head!" Sandy commented. "Can you reach mine and unstrap it?" Both boys still carried their rifles, having secured them firmly to their packs before starting out. Sandy could feel Mike working the slings of his rifle loose. "Got it?" he asked.

"Just a minute," Mike muttered. "There," he said at last. "Where are the shells?"

"In a flap pocket on the side."

"I see them."

Mike opened the box and fed the shells into the chamber. "Here," he said. "Fire away. The safety's on."

Sandy took the gun, flipped the safety switch and jabbed the barrel out of the cave. He fired twice. The booming shots echoed hollowly as they rumbled over the mountains.

"Hear any answer?" Mike asked.

"Give him a chance."

A moment later they heard a pair of muffled explosions. Mike grinned over at Sandy. "That's Hank, all right. Let's try it again."

"Okay." Sandy blasted two more holes in the sky and sat back to wait. This time Hank answered almost immediately.

"I wonder where he is?" Mike muttered.

"Hank!" Sandy shouted. "Hello!"

"Sandy!" came a voice. "Mike! Are you all right?"

"We're fine!" Sandy yelled.

"Where are you?"

"Up here!"

"That's a big help!" Hank's voice was tinged with sarcasm. "Where's 'up here'?"

"He's got a point," Sandy muttered sheepishly. "Do you have a handkerchief, Mike?"

"I think so." Mike fumbled in his pocket. "Here."

Quickly Sandy tied the white handkerchief to the forward sight of the gun and poked it out over the ledge. "Can you see that?" he yelled. "I'm waving a handkerchief."

After a minute or two there was an excited shout from below. "I've got you! How'd you two ever manage to get up there?"

"It wasn't easy!" Mike yelled back. "If you can figure a way of getting us down, we'll let you in on our secret."

"What's the matter with walking?"

"You think it's safe?"

"Sure. It is now."

Sandy and Mike grinned at each other. "Sounds simple," Mike said. "Let's go."

Minutes later they were down at the foot of the slope, telling Hank, as best they could, what had happened.

When they finished, Hank looked at both of them and shook his head. "You know," he said, "some people think there's a guardian angel whose special job is to look out for tenderfeet in the mountains. I never believed it before. But I do now. There's no other explanation."

Mike thought back over the past several days and broke into a grin. "If there is such an angel," he said, "the poor fellow must be close to a nervous breakdown. He's been working overtime."

Hank grunted and peered up the side of the mountain. "It's funny about that cave," he said. "You think it's a big one?"

Sandy nodded. "It looked that way to us."

"It must have been covered over for a long time. I've never seen it before."

"Why don't we explore it some day?"

"Not a bad idea." Hank's eyes were still glued to the hillside. "You can hardly see it from here," he said. "The rocks cover it up completely."

"A good place for an ambush—if there were any Indians around," Sandy commented.

"Or a hiding place," Mike suggested.

Hank glanced at them with amusement. "You fellows sure have lively imaginations."

"Well, you see," Mike explained seriously, "we live such dull lives. Nothing ever happens to us."

Hank laughed. "All right," he said, "let's give you a little action. Still want that goat?"

"Is he still around?" Sandy asked wonderingly. "After all that noise?"

"You mean the goat we spotted up on the peak? Oh no! He lit out for Canada soon as he heard you

two tearing that mountain apart. But he's not the only billy in these hills. How about it?" He looked at them closely. "Or are you still a little shaky?"

Sandy turned to Mike. "What do you think?" he asked. It had almost stopped raining, but instead of clearing, the sky had taken on an even darker, more ominous color. Mike squinted up at the gathering clouds, hitched his pack more comfortably onto his shoulders and nodded. "Let's go!" he said firmly.

Hank grinned at them. "You boys are all right," he said. "I'm going to take you to a hill that's swarming with goats. I never took anybody there before. We might even get ourselves a head that'll make the record books."

But just as he started to turn down the trail, the storm broke with violent, ear-shattering fury. Angry flickers of lightning danced across the tops of nearby ridges. An earth-shaking peal of thunder boomed and rattled down far-off valleys. The rain, which earlier had been falling in a steady drizzle, now came flooding down in streaming torrents.

"Let's find some shelter," Mike shouted.

"Don't bother," Hank replied, pulling up the collar of his jacket. "We're about as wet as we'll ever be. Let's head back to the house. The mountains aren't safe in an electric storm."

Bracing himself against the wind, Hank hunched over and bulled his way through the driving rain, with Sandy and Mike following. It was a miserable hike back, climbing down muddy ravines and slipping over wet gravelly rock. Sandy breathed a sigh of relief when he caught sight of the well-worn trail that led down to Hank's lodge.

"Boy, that looks good!" he shouted above the wind.

Mike looked back and started to say something, but an enormous clap of thunder drowned his words. He gave it up and grinned instead.

They were about halfway down the trail when two sharp reports rang out over the howling storm. Hank stopped abruptly.

"What's that?" Mike asked. "Thunder?"

As another report boomed out, Hank stiffened in surprise.

"No," he said uneasily, reaching for the rifle at his back. "Those are shots. Somebody's shooting down near the house."

Suddenly all three of them were running down the trail. They had heard a sound that was definitely not a part of the storm. It was a terrible, high-pitched scream that cut through the sighing wind like a knife.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Yellow Fury

MIKE WAS THE FIRST to see his father. Mr. Cook was standing on the porch, feet braced apart, a rifle cradled in his arms. Even at that distance, they could see there was an air of tense watchfulness about him, almost as though he expected a sudden attack. When he saw the three of them pounding down the hill toward the house, he vaulted down the steps, waving his arms in an urgent message of warning. But they were still too far away to hear what he was trying to tell them.

Hank broke stride briefly and levered a handful of shells into the breech of his rifle. Without knowing why, Sandy followed suit.

Mr. Cook was now standing in the middle of what could be considered Hank's back yard.

The two corrals—one for the dogs and the other for the pack animals—were over to his right. Hank's lean-to that served as a feed barn was fifty yards over to his left. The dogs, especially Drum, were wild with excitement, adding to the noise and confusion with their sharp yelps of eagerness.

Sandy jammed the last shell into position and raced to catch up with Mike and Hank. "Watch out!" he heard Mr. Cook cry. "He's somewhere near us."

"Who?" Sandy shouted breathlessly as he braked to a stop beside them.

"There's a wounded mountain lion around," Hank said. The line of his jaw was firm and his eyes looked grim.

"He came up to the house about five minutes ago," Mr. Cook explained. "I was inside, sitting by the fire, when I heard a terrific racket behind the house. All the dogs were barking at once. I went out to investigate and saw them scratching and jumping, trying to get out of the corral. Then I saw the cat. I raced back into the house, grabbed a gun and tried for a shot. I should have been more careful and taken a little time. But I was rattled. My first two shots were wild. The third one, though, got him. I'm positive of that."

"Where was he when you hit him?" Hank asked.

"Right over there. Near the watering trough."

"Let's take a look." Hank led the way over to the trough and crouched down to examine the ground. "This rain's coming down so fast it's hard to tell," he muttered. He peered closely at the area around the trough and then straightened with a grunt of satisfaction. "You got him all right," he said. "There's a spill of fresh blood on the grass there."

"I'm sorry I didn't put him away," Mr. Cook apologized. "I thought I was a better shot than that."

"Don't blame you a bit," Hank replied. "What with the storm and all, this light's tricky." He turned to Sandy and Mike. "Well, you've got your lion hunt, boys. We're going to get that cat."

Sandy wheeled and started for the corral. "I'll let the dogs out," he said.

Hank threw out an arm to stop him. "Wait a minute. I don't think we'll use them. We already know where he is." He spoke to Mr. Cook. "Where did you see him last?"

Mr. Cook pointed in the direction of the feeding shed. "He was headed that way."

"All right," Hank said. "We'll each take one side of the building. Check your guns and make sure your safety's off. As soon as you spot him, start pouring lead. If you've got a side shot, aim right behind his shoulder. If he's coming at you head-on, blast him in the chest. Is that clear?"

They nodded and started to move away. "One thing more," Hank added. "Don't take any chances. He's wounded and he's dangerous. This storm has made him nervous and he's probably plenty mad. Sandy, you take the north side of the shed. Mike, you cover the west."

It was then that Sandy noticed for the first time that Joe wasn't with them. He started to ask why, but checked himself. There would be plenty of time for that later. Thumbing the safety catch back, he curled his finger around the trigger and moved cautiously into position.

The rain was letting up a little, but it was still difficult to see. Massive dark clouds continued to roll overhead. Trees, heavy with rainwater, bent and rustled under the force of a snarling wind that slashed at loose leaves and stirred bushes into sudden motion.

Or was that the wind!

Sandy froze and took a closer look. The top leaves of a bush about seventy-five yards away

trembled slightly and then settled back into immobility. Crouched under the tangled stems of the bush was what looked like a long, lean shape, hugging flatly against the ground.

Sandy's heart thumped under the pressure of pounding blood as he knelt slowly to pick up a handful of stones. How long, he wondered, did it take for a mountain lion in full charge to cover seventy-five yards? The thought crossed his mind that he should shoot first, but he rejected it almost immediately as being too risky. The first shot, Hank had told him once, was the one that counted. Every competent hunter waited for his quarry to present itself before he pulled the trigger. Shooting at shadows was wasteful and dangerous.

Sandy took a deep breath and heaved the stones into the bush. As they whistled through the leaves and branches, he yanked his rifle up to his shoulder and tensed himself for a flash of yellow fury.

But nothing happened.

The long, menacing shape under the bush hadn't moved. Sandy's hand was shaking as he lowered the rifle. Breathing in short, dry gasps, he forced himself to relax. There was nothing under the bush more dangerous than a dead, half-rotted log.

Feeling embarrassed and a little foolish, he turned to see how the others were doing. Over to his right, Mike was sweeping carefully in toward the shed, his body bent slightly forward in an attitude of absorbed concentration.

Just as Sandy craned around to locate Mr. Cook, the corner of his eye caught a lightning-fast motion. It happened so quickly and was over so fast that Sandy wasn't sure, at first, whether he had actually seen it.

Something vaguely earth-colored had dropped silently from a tree behind Mike and was now hidden under a cover of tall grass that ran along the border of the clearing.

Uneasily, Sandy swung around and moved closer to the waving grass under the tree. He saw a flurry among the stems and then what looked like a ripple of motion less than forty yards behind Mike's back.

Sandy broke into a quick trot, narrowing the range to approximately sixty yards. Mike was completely unaware of what was going on behind him, and Sandy felt no inclination to shout. A startled cat might jump before he was properly in position.

There was another rippling movement from the clump of grass. Then slowly the tangle of

underbrush parted and Sandy saw the mountain lion.

The big cat's head was flat against the ground and his eyes were fastened on Mike. Sandy sensed that the beast was gathering itself for a spring, and suddenly he knew that he would have to fire quickly.

Now that the crisis had come, Sandy was surprisingly calm. He brought the rifle up to his shoulder and nestled his cheek comfortably against the stock. As the mountain lion loomed up into the field of his telescopic sight, Sandy noticed that his eyes were thin slits of yellow. They looked malevolent and deadly. Powerful muscles at the joints of his shoulders gathered and hunched into hard knots. In another moment they would uncoil, sending two hundred pounds of clawing death down on Mike's unsuspecting back.

Bracing himself for the gun's recoil, Sandy took a deep breath and squeezed slowly down on the trigger. The intersection of the two cross hairs was centered on a spot directly above and behind the cougar's foreleg. Sandy could feel the trigger pressing harder into the crook of his finger as he held the rifle steady. He closed down the last sixteenth of an inch and held his breath.

The cat made his move a split second before Sandy fired. Then three things happened simultaneously. Sandy's rifle roared out, missing a fatal spot, but slamming into the cougar's side. Mike whirled around at the sound of the explosion, saw the cat and backed away instinctively. As he stepped back, his foot caught on a stray root and he sprawled awkwardly to the ground, losing his rifle. The impact of the bullet momentarily broke the lion's charge. The force of the blow sent him spinning into the earth with a spine-tingling scream of pain and rage. By the time he clawed back to his feet to renew his attack, Sandy had managed to pump another shell into the chamber.

This time he didn't miss. He caught the cat three inches behind the shoulder and could almost see the slug smack home. The lion lunged through the air, jerked once and slumped to the ground, barely fifteen feet from Mike's frightened face.

Still holding his rifle, Sandy walked unsteadily over to Mike.

"You all right?" he asked huskily.

Mike gulped and nodded wordlessly. His face was completely drained of color. He made no attempt to stand up.

The next moment, Mr. Cook was bending over

his son, but Mike refused any help and scrambled to his feet. He walked over to Sandy and extended his hand. "Thanks, Sandy," he said quietly. "I never expected to come out of that alive."

Sandy took the outstretched hand and gave Mike a friendly punch on the shoulder. "That makes us even, Mike."

Mike managed a weak grin of acknowledgment. "Let's not do it again," he said.

Hank, who had been covering the south side of the shed, was the last to arrive on the scene. When he was told what had happened, he frowned and walked over to Mr. Cook.

"Listen, Arthur," he said sincerely, "I'm sorry Mike had such a bad time, but I guess it's my fault. I should have stalked that lion alone."

"Don't talk nonsense," Mr. Cook replied. "The boys wouldn't have let you."

"Anyway," Hank went on, "I never expected to see a mountain lion attack from cover. They don't normally do that, unless they're being deviled by dogs. I've been going after them for more than twenty years and this is the first time anything like that's ever happened. I knew there'd be a little danger, but I didn't think it would be quite so serious. I was confident the boys would

have plenty of time to place their shots."

"Well," observed Mr. Cook with a smile, "they did. Or at least one of them did."

They walked over to the dead mountain lion. Hank bent down and lifted one enormous paw. "Right where I told you to shoot," he said. "Nice work, Sandy. I'll skin it for you and you'll have yourself a fine trophy."

"I think Mike should have it," Sandy said. "As a sort of reminder."

"No, thanks!" Mike protested. "I'd just as soon never see that cat again. I'll bag one of my own. Joe guaranteed it—remember?" Mike stopped and looked around with a puzzled expression.

"By the way," he said, "where is Joe? You'd think he'd be here, with all this shooting."

Mr. Cook cleared his throat and looked at the three of them strangely. "I've got some news for you," he said, "and I don't know what to make of it. Early this morning—right after you left—Joe and I were sitting on the porch, cleaning the guns, when suddenly I noticed him start and grow pale. I followed his eyes and there—up in the mountains behind the lodge—I saw a thin column of smoke. You three didn't light a campfire by any chance?"

They shook their heads.

Mr. Cook raised his eyebrows and nodded. "I was afraid of that," he went on. "About an hour later I noticed that Joe was gone. I looked around and called, but he wasn't in the house or near it."

"What do you mean?" Sandy asked.

"Exactly what I said," Mr. Cook slowly replied. "Joe has disappeared—vanished."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Three Crows

"YOU DON'T SUPPOSE," Sandy suggested, and the words came out hesitantly, "that he was killed by the lion? That he walked right across his path?"

"The lion came down from above us," Mr. Cook pointed out. "There's no guarantee that Joe went in that direction."

"But the smoke," Sandy countered. "You said it was coming from the mountain."

"Yes, but how do we know he went looking for the men that built the fire? It seemed to me he didn't especially want to meet them. He probably went back down the trail to Mormon Crossing."

"That's true," Sandy admitted. "Except for one thing. It doesn't sound like Joe."

"I go along with Sandy," Mike asserted. "Joe

isn't the kind of person who backs away from trouble."

"Say, hold on for a minute," Hank interrupted. "You people seem to know an awful lot more than I do." He turned to Mr. Cook. "What did you mean just now when you said something about the men who built the fire? Have you seen anybody on your trip upriver?"

Mr. Cook quickly filled Hank in on the story of Joe's mishap back in Salmon. Hank listened attentively, without unnecessary interruptions. Mr. Cook told him Joe's story about the three Crow Indians and ended up describing Joe's reaction the night above Cutthroat Rapids when they saw the mysterious smoke on the horizon. "It's all too much of a pattern for me to believe it's coincidence," Mr. Cook concluded.

"But what kind of a pattern?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea."

"You left out one thing," Sandy reminded Mr. Cook. "How he seemed to know all about Mormon Crossing and the massacre."

"I thought we'd settled that. It was tribal lore passed down from his elders."

"No," Sandy insisted. "That's still a theory. We don't know for sure."

"Hey!" Mike interrupted suddenly. "Did you

take a look to see if his stuff is still around?"

"I did," his father replied. "And it is."

"Then he didn't go back down to the river," Mike said triumphantly.

"Why do you say that?"

"If he planned to run away, he'd take his things with him. If he intended to come back, he wouldn't bother."

Mr. Cook nodded in agreement. "You've got a point there."

"That means," Mike went on, "that he's up there somewhere in the mountains."

"With the chances very good," Sandy said, "of his being in trouble."

There was a pause as the four of them stared thoughtfully at the jagged range of peaks that towered above them. The rain had tapered off and a weak sun was struggling to break through the clouds.

"Yes, you may be right," Mr. Cook agreed. "But I'm afraid we can't do much. No sense in stumbling around without knowing where we're going."

"Would you help him if you could?" Sandy asked eagerly.

"Yes, I would," Mr. Cook said with conviction.

"I like Joe and if there's anything dishonest going on, I'm positive Joe's not mixed up in it."

"All right, then," Sandy said unexpectedly. "Let's go."

They stared at him in astonishment. "Where?" Mr. Cook said. "Where do we start?"

"You said Joe left his things?"

"That's right."

Sandy addressed his next question to Hank. "Those dogs of yours—they track lions by scent, don't they?"

Hank granted that was so.

"If we give them some of Joe's clothing to sniff," Sandy went on, "wouldn't they follow his scent?"

"Like bloodhounds!" Mike cried.

"Exactly. What about it?"

"It might work," Hank said slowly. "It's certainly worth a try."

"I'll go and get an old shirt of Joe's," Mike said, turning toward the lodge.

"Hang on a minute," Mr. Cook ordered. "Let's not rush out right away. If we start tracking Joe, it might take some time. Overnight maybe. I suggest we pack some supplies, get a good meal inside ourselves and then go."

Mike grinned over at his father. "Now that," he said enthusiastically, "sounds like a first-rate idea —particularly the part about food."

"I thought you'd appreciate it," Mr. Cook said dryly.

At first the dogs were undecided about Joe's shirt. They sniffed it and nosed it back and forth eagerly but refused to strike out on a course. Instead they ran around in circles, some of them off in one direction, others headed exactly the opposite way.

It was Drum who finally called the pack to order. He had been moving purposefully around the clearing, keeping his nose close to the ground, when suddenly he stopped and began to scratch the earth. After a few minutes of furious activity, he looked up and trotted back to the shirt for a second sniff. It seemed to satisfy him. Raising his head, he barked commandingly. The dogs around him stopped their aimless wandering and turned around. A series of deep-throated barks brought them scampering up as he led the way over the trail that curved deep into the mountains.

"That's it!" cried Hank. "He's got the scent! You can always tell."

Hurriedly they formed a line behind the dogs. Hank was first, Mr. Cook second, while the boys brought up the rear.

After nearly an hour of breathless climbing, Sandy saw they were following the trail they had taken earlier that morning on the goat hunt that had almost ended in disaster. "Look," he said, pointing to a tumbled pile of rocks spilled over the lower half of a peak. "Recognize that?"

Mike glanced over and grimaced. "I won't forget it in a hurry."

Sandy stopped for a moment and peered up. "You can't even see the cave from here," he remarked.

"That's right," Mike said. "No wonder Hank had a hard time finding us."

"Hey, you two!" came a voice. "Stop admiring the view and keep moving."

"We're coming!" Sandy shouted. "Boy," he said, panting, "those dogs can really travel."

Mike nodded. "Save your breath," he advised.

They moved ahead in silence for another twenty minutes when suddenly Sandy heard Mike grunt irritably. "Darn it!" he muttered.

Sandy turned to see Mike's bedroll on the ground with his belongings scattered beside it. "Strap broke," Mike explained.

"Hank!" Sandy shouted. "Can you wait a minute?"

Hank turned and looked back. "What happened?" he yelled.

"A bedroll strap broke. We'll have it fixed in a minute."

"We'll go on ahead to the top of this slope," Hank shouted down. "We can see a lot of the country from up there. I'll collect the dogs and wait for you."

"Okay! We'll be right up."

Mike was hurriedly gathering together his equipment, frowning angrily as he stuffed various articles into his blanket. "Everything happens to me!" he said in an annoyed voice. "D'you think we can mend that strap?"

"I think so. It won't take long."

"Just when we're in a hurry!"

"What's that?" Sandy said suddenly.

"Where?"

"Behind you."

Mike swiveled and made a grab for something lying on the ground. With a sheepish grin he tried to tuck it into the folds of his bedroll.

Sandy laughed when he saw what it was. "That looks suspiciously like a sandwich wrapped in waxed paper."

"Wrong again," Mike said cheerfully. "It's two sandwiches. I thought we might get a little hungry."

Sandy shook his head admiringly. "Remind me never to go into the grocery business with you. You'd eat up all the profits before . . ."

But Mike wasn't listening. He was staring down at a colorful patch of red-checked cloth draped over a rock about three feet off the trail.

"What's the matter?" Sandy asked.

Mike pointed to the patch. "Take a look at that," he said.

Sandy walked over and picked it up. "It's a piece of cloth," he said.

"It's more than that," Mike said seriously. "It belongs to Joe's shirt."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Don't you recognize the pattern? Big black stripes over the red, with little yellow lines running through it."

Sandy nodded. "It's Joe's all right. What do we do now?"

"Let's get this strap fixed and tell Hank and Dad."

"It looks to me," Sandy mused as he glanced over the terrain, "as if Joe broke away from the trail right about here."

"What makes you say that?" Mike was busy tying a knot in his broken strap.

"Look where the piece fell. I think he climbed up here and tore his shirt doing it. Maybe we ought to do a little exploring on our own."

Mike shook his head in disagreement. "Let's stop being heroes. If Joe's in trouble, we won't be able to help him alone."

"I guess you're right," Sandy admitted. "But I sure would like to know what's above those rocks."

"We'll know in a little while," Mike assured him, heaving the bedroll over his shoulder, "soon as we can bring Dad and Hank down here."

"I think," Sandy said in a very quiet voice, "that we'll know sooner than that."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked. He glanced at Sandy, and was surprised to see the strange expression on his face. He followed Sandy's gaze up to the row of boulders above their heads, and suddenly he knew why Sandy had frozen.

Standing on the rocks were three men. Two of them carried rifles which they kept trained down at the boys. All three, Mike saw, had the dark complexion and long, straight hair of Indians.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Captured

THE MIDDLE INDIAN—the one without a rifle—was the first to speak. "Drop your packs to the ground," he ordered. His voice was hard and guttural. "And do it slow."

Mike stiffened in anger, and for a moment Sandy thought he was going to try to make a break for it. "Take it easy," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Better do what he says."

Mike shook his head stubbornly. "They're not going to do any shooting," he insisted. "The others are too close."

The Indian gave a short, unpleasant laugh. "You think they'd get back in time?" he asked.

"They'd be back in time to get you!" Mike flared.

"Try it," the Indian invited. His voice became hard and menacing. "We could pick you off and wait for the others to come running back. This place makes a perfect ambush."

The realization that Hank and his father might also be killed sobered Mike considerably. He reached up and loosened the strap that held his bedroll and rifle. Keeping his eyes on the rifles that stared down at them, Sandy did the same.

"Now move back. And keep your hands up in the air."

Sandy and Mike did as they were told. The two armed Indians vaulted lightly down from their perch, approached the blankets, and took the boys' guns.

"All right," the Indian on the rock ordered. "Pick up your packs and climb up here."

"Where are we going?" Sandy demanded.

"You'll find out soon enough" came the answer. "Just keep moving—and don't try anything."

For the better part of an hour, they moved silently ahead, climbing higher into the mountains, avoiding what trails there were, keeping close to the protective cover afforded by the thick stands of jack pine. At last they arrived at a small

clearing, perched high on the top of a lonely, desolate peak. The clearing was admirably situated, with an unobstructed view on three sides and accessible only by a single trail that wound tortuously up through jagged piles of razor-sharp rock. Sandy noticed the remains of a fire surrounded by three blanket rolls. It was an uncomfortable but well-hidden campsite.

"Sit over there," the lead Indian commanded. He walked over to a blanket roll and rummaged through it. The other Indians stood to one side, keeping their guns trained on Sandy and Mike.

"What's all this about?" Sandy said irritably. "What do you want from us?"

"Nothing," the Indian replied. "Not a single thing. It's Eagle Plume we want—Joe, to you."

"Then you must be the three Crows!" Mike blurted out.

The Indian straightened up from his pack and looked at them. There was a flat, veiled expression in his eyes. "Yes," he said quietly, "we're Crows. So Joe's been telling you about us."

Sandy glanced over at Mike to warn him into silence. "He mentioned you once," he replied. "Said there was some bad feeling between you."

"What else did he say?" It was more of a command than a question.

"Nothing. Joe didn't talk much."

The Indian nodded. "I can believe that. He wouldn't want you to know too much."

"About what?"

"Never mind," the Indian said briefly. "I bet you never guessed that Joe has been using you all this time."

"Using us!"

"Sure. He had to find some way of getting to Mormon Crossing. You made it easy for him."

Sandy and Mike digested this piece of news in silence. Joe didn't seem like the kind who would deliberately "use" somebody and then disappear without a word. But there was no effective reply to what they had heard.

"It's too bad you had to poke your noses into this," the Indian went on. "But now that you're here, you can be useful."

"We wouldn't lift a finger to help you!" Mike declared hotly.

The Indian threw him a disdainful look. "You won't have anything to say about it." He reached down and drew a long rope from his pack. He tossed it to one of the Indians with a rifle. "Tie them up," he ordered. "The dark one first." Mike struggled to his feet and the second Indian moved around to a point directly behind Sandy. "I

wouldn't try that," the leader advised Mike sharply. "Unless you want to see your friend shot. I wouldn't kill him—just a bullet in his leg, maybe. But I don't think he'd like it much."

Mike stiffened, his mouth a grim line of anger, but he allowed the Indian to pin his arms behind his back. The Crow worked quickly and efficiently. In a moment Mike was helpless.

"Now the other one," the Indian said. Sandy felt strong hands grab his arms and twist a length of rope tightly around his wrists. He gasped involuntarily as the rope bit deep into his skin. A second rope was coiled around his ankles. Rough hands threw him heavily on the ground, ran a line through his wrist bindings and joined the other end to the rope that held his ankles. When this was drawn tight, Sandy's legs were jerked back, forcing his spine into an awkward arc. The halter knotted between the two bindings made it impossible for him to move. If he tried to work his fingers free, the pressure drew his legs further up behind him. Any motion from his feet pulled his arms painfully out of joint.

When the job was done, the lead Indians seemed satisfied. "Good," he grunted. "That'll keep you from wandering off." He glanced speculatively up at the sky. "Couple more hours of

daylight," he said. "Time enough to try to find Joe and have a talk with him."

"What are you going to do with us?" Sandy asked, gritting his teeth against the pain of the ropes.

"Leave you here until we get back. Don't worry. You'll be all right. You're too valuable to us alive —for now, anyway."

Sandy let the last remark pass. "How do you know where to find Joe?"

"Curious, aren't you?" The Indian leaned down and picked up Sandy's rifle. "To tell you the truth," he said, throwing open the bolt, "I don't know." He slammed the bolt shut and moved off. "But if we don't find him today, we'll talk to him tomorrow. Don't worry. We'll get together sooner or later." He made an abrupt motion with his head and the other two Indians disappeared silently down the trail.

"The quicker we see Joe," he said, "the quicker you two get out of here. So wish us luck." He turned and followed his companions. Sandy and Mike could hear the subdued tones of whispered conversation, then silence.

By working himself around on one shoulder, Sandy managed to twist himself into a position

where he could see Mike. "You okay?" he called softly.

Mike grunted sourly. "I'd feel a lot better if I could figure this thing out."

"Joe sure seems to have gotten himself into a mess of trouble," Sandy said.

"What about us, for Pete's sake! We're not doing too badly."

Despite their situation, Sandy grinned. "You're right," he admitted. "Those boys don't fool around, do they?"

Mike pulled himself around and grimaced. "One thing I'll have to hand them. They tie a mean knot."

"Can you move at all?" Sandy asked.

"Sure," Mike replied bitterly. "Just enough to break my back!"

"There's a knife in my bedroll over there," Sandy speculated.

"Do you think you can make it?"

"I don't know. I can try pushing myself along the ground."

Sandy concentrated on lunging forward, but after a few minutes he knew it wasn't going to work. "No good," he panted. "I can't make any headway."

"How long did they say they'd be gone?"

"Till dark. That's about an hour and a half. I'm afraid my arms are going to drop off before then. How do yours feel?"

"Not too good." The tightly knotted ropes were beginning to cut off circulation and it occurred to Sandy that he'd better keep his fingers and toes in motion.

He was about to advise Mike to do the same when he heard a faint scraping noise that froze him into immobility. It came a second time, a short distance to his rear. He experienced a moment of panic as he envisioned a mountain lion stalking up to the camp, but he managed to keep his voice calm when he called out to Mike.

"Hey, Mike! Do you hear anything?"

Mike cocked his head. "No," he said. "Not a thing."

"It sounds like somebody coming up the trail."

Mike strained his head to take a look. "No," he began, "I don't see any . . ." His voice broke off in an excited shout. "Joe! What are you doing here?"

"Shhh!" came a voice. "Keep it down. Lie still and let me get you out of those ropes."

The next instant Joe was kneeling by Sandy's side, a sharp knife in one hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Secret of the Cave

"WHAT'S GOING ON, Joe?" Sandy demanded. He was rubbing his wrists, trying to get the circulation going again while Joe was busy with the knots that held Mike.

"There's no time for a long explanation now," Joe said as he slashed through the last of the ropes. "We've got to get out of here and find the others."

"Those friends of yours seem to want something pretty bad," Mike said as he rolled over and got back on his feet. "What I don't get is why they think we can help them."

"You were taken as hostages," Joe explained. "They were going to use you to force me into something."

"Into what?" Sandy wanted to know.

Joe stepped over and put his hand on Sandy's shoulder. "Look," he said. "I know I've acted badly the last couple of days. I should have told you right from the beginning. But, as I say, it's a long story and we just don't have time now. Will you trust me for a little while longer?"

Sandy nodded. "Sure. What's the next move?"

"To find Hank and Mr. Cook."

"Do you know where they are?"

Joe shook his head. "No idea."

Sandy thought for a moment. "They probably went back to the house after we disappeared."

"That sounds right," Joe said. He looked up at the sky doubtfully. "But we'll never make it by dark."

"Then we'll travel as far as we can and hide out till dawn."

Mike snapped his fingers. "I know just the place," he said. "That cave of ours. The one we fell into."

"Right!" Sandy nodded.

"What cave?" Joe looked puzzled.

"That's a long story too," Sandy replied with a grin. "We'll tell you on the way."

They reached the cave with about an hour of daylight to spare. Mike was the first one to pull

himself over the lip and into the opening. Then he reached down and helped Joe in.

"Welcome to our humble establishment," he said, bending over in a deep bow. "You'll find this the perfect place for an overnight stop. The rooms are spacious and well ventilated. Our rates are reasonable and I'm sure you'll find the service . . ." He checked himself when he saw the look on Joe's face. "What's the matter?" he said.

"You say this cave was hidden?" Joe asked. His voice sounded oddly hollow. It was clear he was doing his best to hold down a mounting excitement.

"It was, before we knocked away the mountain," Sandy said.

"How deep is it?"

"We didn't feel much like exploring the last time we were here."

"Have you got a flashlight?"

"In my bedroll."

"Let me have it, please."

Sandy reached into his blanket and handed over his flashlight. Joe practically snatched it out of his hand and plunged off into the interior of the cave.

"Hey, wait for us!" Mike called.

The cave slanted back at a sharp angle and opened gradually into a large shallow cavern. Sandy stared at the blank wall opposite with a frown of disappointment. "Not very big, is it?" he commented.

But Joe didn't hear him. He was down on his knees beside a pile of stones near the right-hand wall. "Help me with these," he called urgently.

Mike and Sandy exchanged puzzled glances and went over to the pile of rocks. Joe was pulling it apart, working with a feverish concentration. Sandy could hear him panting with excitement.

Suddenly there was a hoarse cry as Joe tore away a large flat stone. "Look!" he shouted. The boys leaned over his shoulder and, in the light of the pocket flash, saw what appeared to be a good-sized wooden box. The wood was very old and part of the top had rotted off.

Joe swept the remaining stones out of the way and curled his fingers under the lid. Bracing himself against the floor of the cave, he heaved up with all his strength. There was a sharp tearing noise and the top cracked open.

"There!" said Joe, playing the flashlight down into the box. "That's what all this has been about."

Sandy gasped. The chest was full of neatly

stacked bars of silver—much of it tarnished with age, but still recognizable.

For a moment nobody was able to speak. Sandy was the first to find his voice.

"Who does it belong to?" he whispered.

"To us," Joe said firmly. "To all of us."

"Us?" Sandy cried. "Why?"

"Because you helped me find it. I couldn't have done it without you."

Sandy started to say something but a familiar sound caught him up short. "Listen!" he said urgently. The others stood still and held their breath. "Do you hear it?" Sandy cried in excitement. "It's the dogs. I can hear Drum!"

"They must be near the cave!" Mike shouted.

The three of them wheeled and sprinted for the entrance, the treasure momentarily forgotten. "They're getting closer!" Sandy yelled. In a final burst of speed, they scrambled up to the lip of the cave and broke out into the fading sunlight. Down at the bottom of the slope Sandy could see the first of the dogs coming around a turn in the trail. Drum was in the lead.

"Up here!" Sandy shouted, moving down the slope. "We're up by the cave!" Suddenly he felt himself grabbed from behind and slammed to the ground.

A rifle roared and Sandy heard the angry whine of a bullet as it passed over his head.

"Back inside!" Joe shouted.

Sandy looked up to see three figures coming toward them. "The Crows!" he gasped.

"Right!" Joe muttered as he struggled to his feet. But the first of the Crows was already on top of them. With a last desperate lunge, the Indian covered the remaining distance by throwing himself on Joe. Sandy saw him slash down with his rifle butt and saw Joe duck the blow. Then the two men were rolling on the ground, fighting grimly for possession of the gun.

Sandy barely had time to lean down and grab an apple-sized rock before the other two Indians dove at him. Sandy heaved the rock at one of them, saw it strike him full in the chest, and then whirled to meet the charge of the second. Just as they were about to close, a snarling black-and-tan flash brushed Sandy to one side and fastened on the Indian's throat. The Crow gave a frightened scream and battled to keep away from the slashing jaws. It was Drum, Hank's lead dog, who had thrown himself at the Indian. The others in the pack were right behind him.

With a yell of terror, the Indian disappeared under a writhing wave of growling dogs.

"Down, Drum!" came an authoritative voice. Hank Dawson was striding purposefully toward the mass of dogs. He waded into them without fear and grabbed Drum firmly by the scruff of the neck. "Back!" he ordered. Drum shook himself and moved off a few paces, sitting watchfully on his hindquarters, ready to leap at his master's command. The other dogs of the pack followed his example. The Indian was lying on the ground, his torn hands covering his head.

Sandy glanced around to see how Joe was doing. He had subdued his attacker and was standing to one side, panting heavily, a rifle in his hand. The third Crow was sitting where Sandy's rock had flattened him, a look of dazed surprise on his face.

"All right now," Hank Dawson said sternly. "What's this all about?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Story of Mormon Crossing

"EVER HEAR of Sun Mountain?" It was evening, after dinner. They were all sitting in front of the big stone fireplace, dead-tired, but determined to hear Joe's story at last.

"Don't think I have," Hank rumbled. Nobody else answered.

"Sun Mountain," Joe went on, "is a fancy name for one of the ugliest hunks of rock in the West."

"Where is it?"

"In western Nevada, right near the California border." Joe paused and looked over at Hank. "You don't have a map by any chance, do you?"

"I think so." Hank got up and plucked a dog-eared atlas down from a nearby shelf. "This do?"

"Sure." Joe leafed through the pages until he came to a map of the northwest United States. "Here," he said as the others crowded around, "is the place I'm talking about. Back in the days of the gold rush, Sun Mountain was important for only one reason. Wagon trains coming west used it as a guide. Right behind the mountain, you see, was a pass that took them over the Sierras into California."

"It was the last jumping-off point before the gold fields," Sandy remarked.

"Right," Joe said. "But aside from that, nobody was interested in it. It was a lonely, miserable place. Sweltering hot in the summer and bitter cold in the winter. It didn't have much in the way of trees or any kind of growth because all the water around there was next door to being poisonous."

"How come?" Mike demanded.

"A mineral deposit inside the mountain seeped arsenic into the water. Anyway," Joe continued, "wagon-train parties would rest up there before trying the pass. Sometimes they'd have to wait for days before they could move ahead."

"What kept them back?" Sandy asked.

"Snow up in the high peaks. The pass would be blocked." Joe closed the atlas and went back to

his chair. "Some of the parties used to do a little mining up around Sun Mountain while they waited—nothing much, you understand—just enough to make the time go by till they got to the big bonanzas in California." Joe laughed and fished for a cigarette. "If they'd only known," he said. "The biggest bonanza of all was right under their noses."

"Was there gold on Sun Mountain?" Sandy asked.

Joe shook his head. "No, not gold. Silver. That whole mountain was practically made of silver. You've heard of Virginia City?"

"Sure!" Sandy cried. "The Comstock Lode!"

"It was right on top of Sun Mountain. It was discovered in 1859. A vein of pure silver nearly sixty feet wide. Before it was worked out, it was worth nearly three quarters of a billion dollars."

Mike whistled softly. "Did you say *billion?*"

"I did."

"And they passed it right by?"

"Back in the 1850s they weren't interested in silver. Everybody was thinking about gold."

Mr. Cook leaned over and maneuvered another log onto the fire. "I'm beginning to see the connection," he said. "The silver you found in the cave originally came from Sun Mountain."

"That's right," Joe said. "Somewhere in the 1850s a party of Mormons . . ."

"I knew it!" Sandy interrupted. "The same party that was massacred!"

Joe smiled. "Yes," he admitted. "You were right all the time. I didn't know that anybody knew about that incident. That's why I was so startled when you told the story the day we first met. It happened just the way you described. They stopped over at Sun Mountain, found a rich vein of silver, and then moved on. Maybe they wanted to found a new community of their own. Anyway, they decided to head north. My people—the Blackfeet—massacred them here in the mountains."

"How do you know that?" Hank asked.

"The story of the massacre was handed down by my tribe. As a matter of fact, it was my great-great-great-grandfather who led the raid."

"Score one for Mike," Mr. Cook said. "That's exactly the way he said it happened."

Joe turned to Mike and laughed. "You people seem to have figured out everything."

"But how did you know about the silver?" Sandy insisted.

"Before they were wiped out," Joe explained, "the Mormons hid the silver in the cave that you

two found earlier today. Each man in the party was given a map, just in case there were any survivors."

"But there weren't?"

Joe shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "Every last one of them was wiped out. My great-great-and-so-forth-grandfather found a copy of the map. He kept it as a souvenir of the victory. In the years that went by, it was lost. I happened to find it in among my father's possessions about six months ago. I knew about the story of the massacre and I'd heard about the map. When I actually saw it, I got pretty excited."

"I can imagine," Mr. Cook said.

"I'm afraid I talked about it too much. Other people heard about it."

"Including our friends, the Crows," Hank said.

Joe nodded. "To make a long story short, they stole my copy of the map. Luckily, I had it memorized. I knew I had to get out here before they did, and when you offered me a job to come to Mormon Crossing, I thought everything was going to be all right."

"But you hadn't counted on their moving so fast," Mr. Cook put in.

"Even then," Joe said grimly, "I didn't think they'd actually try to kill me." He paused and

stared into the fire. "I knew better after my 'accident' on Mr. Henderson's dock in Salmon."

"Did they do that?" Sandy asked.

"Yes," Joe said. "They did. Apparently they were desperate enough to do anything to keep me away from Mormon Crossing."

Mr. Cook leaned forward in his chair. "But, Joe," he said, "why didn't you tell us?"

Joe shook his head and shrugged. "I guess I should have," he said. "But I didn't want you to get involved. I thought that once we got away, the danger would be over."

"But then you saw the smoke," Mike said.

"And I knew they were on my trail. I didn't know what to do," Joe said. "I knew I was putting you in danger and I didn't want that, so I decided to disappear and try to find the silver before they did."

"What good would that have done?" Mr. Cook pointed out. "They would just have come after you later."

"You're right," Joe admitted. "I guess I was too worried to think things through clearly. At any rate, I was up in the mountains when you came looking for me. I saw Sandy and Mike get captured by the Crows. I followed them up to the Crow campsite and waited for the Crows to leave.

You know the rest. They were going to use the boys as hostages to force me into giving up the search."

"One thing still puzzles me," Mr. Cook said.

"What is it?"

"First of all, if you and the Crows both knew where the silver was located, why didn't you pick it up right away?"

"Because we couldn't," Joe explained. "We all went looking for the cave, but it was too well hidden. If it hadn't been for Sandy and Mike falling into it, we'd still be running around up there in the mountains."

"Then why were the Crows up at the cave when we arrived with the dogs?"

"They knew approximately where the cave should be. The map told them that. They were hunting around, the same as I was. What were you doing there?"

"We were searching for you—or the boys. The dogs led us up to the cave just in time to see the action."

"Lucky for us," Sandy said.

"I'll say!" Mike grinned. "By the way, what's going to happen to our friends?"

"The Crows?"

"Yes."

"All taken care of," Hank assured him.

Mike looked surprised. "How?" he asked.

"I've got a short-wave radio up here," Hank explained. "I've called the police and they're sending a helicopter."

"Now there's an unexpected touch," said Mr. Cook, laughing. "In the middle of all this wilderness a helicopter!"

"A very handy device, Arthur," Hank said. "Most of the Western states today have an emergency helicopter service for backwoods communities and isolated hunting parties. It's saved a lot of lives."

"I imagine it has."

"When will it arrive?"

"First thing in the morning. It'll take the Crows to Boise. I've locked them in the barn for the night. They'll have to stand charges for assault with intent to kill as well as a little matter of kidnaping."

Mike frowned. "Does that mean we'll have to go, too?"

"I'm afraid so. But don't worry. It won't be for long. We'll be back here in three or four days at the most."

"Joe too?" They all turned and looked at the Indian.

He grinned and nodded his head. "Sure, I'll be back," he said. "I signed on for a month, didn't I?"

"I thought maybe now that you're a millionaire, you wouldn't want to keep on being a guide."

Joe laughed. "I'm not that rich. Three or four thousand dollars at the most. Wouldn't you say, Hank?"

Hank nodded. "I figure it's worth about that."

"Split five ways, that makes . . ."

"Hey, hold on a minute!" Sandy cried. "We're not going to take any of it."

"Yes, you are," Joe insisted. "I thought we decided that."

"No," Mr. Cook said firmly. "It's your money. You told us once about that place in Montana you wanted. Well, now you can buy it."

Joe tried to protest, but he was overruled. "All right," he said finally. "But there are two things you can't stop me from doing."

"What's that?" Sandy asked.

"Neither of the boys has a game rifle of his own. They'll have one when we get back here. The second thing is this. As soon as I get my place in Montana, you people have a standing invitation to come up any time for the best hunting and fishing in the Rockies."

"We'll take you up on that, Joe," Mr. Cook said.

"You bet!" Sandy cried enthusiastically.

Mike held up one hand. "There's just one thing I want to know."

"What's that?"

"In Montana—does everything start at dawn? Or do you think maybe I could get some sleep?"

"Mike," Joe replied, "when you come to visit me, I'll arrange it so the fish don't start to bite before noon, and as far as I'm concerned, you can do your hunting from a hammock."

"That," said Mike, "is something I'm looking forward to."

"Right now," Sandy said as he rose wearily to his feet, "the only thing I'm looking forward to is a good night's sleep. When did you say that helicopter was going to get here?"

Hank reached over and snuffed out the kerosene lamp on the mantel. "At dawn," he said. "Right on the stroke of five-thirty."

The general laughter drowned out Mike's anguished groan of protest.